

NO GUNS LIFE | RENEGADES ON THE RUN!

OTAKUUSA

01582

A large, vibrant illustration of Luffy from the anime One Piece. He is wearing his signature straw hat and red shirt, and is shown from the chest up, looking directly at the viewer with a confident smile. He is surrounded by a large pile of gold coins at his feet. The background is a dark, circular shape with the Japanese word 'オタク' (Otaku) written in white.

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DIRECT FROM JAPAN

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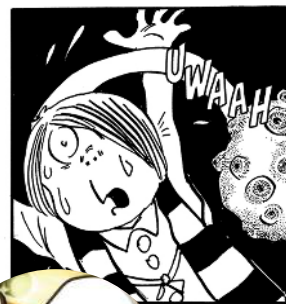
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FOOD WARS!

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NO GUNS LIFE

Where did *No Guns Life* begin? Find out more about its manga origin

ONE PIECE

While the movie scorches the big screens, the Wano Arc continues unabated! Find out the best place to start!



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IMAGE:
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"One Piece"
production committee

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Otaku USA (ISSN 1939 3318) is published bimonthly by Sovereign Media, 6731 Whittier Ave., C-100, McLean, VA 20101. (703) 964-0361. Periodical postage paid at McLean, VA, and additional mailing offices. *Otaku USA*, Volume 13, Number 4 © 2020 by Sovereign Media Company, Inc., all rights reserved. Copyrights to stories and illustrations are the property of their creators. The contents of this publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without consent of the copyright owner. **Subscription services, back issues, and information:** (800) 219-1187, or write to *Otaku USA*, Circulation, P.O. Box 1644, Williamsport, PA 17703. Single copies: \$5.99, plus \$3 for postage. Yearly subscription in USA: \$24.95; Canada and Overseas: \$38.95 (U.S.). Editorial Office: Send editorial mail to *Otaku USA*, 6731 Whittier Ave., Suite C-100, McLean, VA 22101. *Otaku USA* welcomes editorial submissions but assumes no responsibility for the loss or damage of unsolicited material. Materials to be returned should be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. We suggest that you send a self-addressed stamped envelope for a copy of the author's guidelines. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Otaku USA*, P.O. Box 1644, Williamsport, PA 17703.

Carl A. Gnam, Jr.
Editorial Director

Patrick Macias
Editor in Chief

Joseph Luster
Editor/Games & Website

Shaenon K. Garrity
Editor/Manga

Samantha DeTulleo
Art Director

Contributors:

Ani-Mia, Jules L. Carrozza, Paul Thomas Chapman, Kara Dennison, David Estrella, Che Gilson, Michael Goldstein, Kristina Kotsamanidis, Robert L. McCarthy, Evan Minto, Austin Price, Daryl Surat, Jason Bradley Thompson, Danny Tanner, Brittany Vincent

Design Contributor
Dawn Stein

Production Assistant
Julian Gnam

Advertising Office
Diane Hintz
Advertising Director
(703) 964-0361

Ben Boyles
Account Executive
(570) 322-7848, Ext. 130
benjaminb@sovhomestead.com

Linda Galliher
Ad Coordinator
(570) 322-7848, ext. 160
lgalliher@sovmmedia.com

Mark Hintz
Chief Executive Officer

Robin Lee
Bookkeeper

Subscription Customer Service
(800) 219-1187
sovereign@publishersserviceassociates.com

Comag Marketing Group
Worldwide Distribution

Sovereign Media Company, Inc.
6731 Whittier Avenue, C-100, McLean, VA 22101
(703) 964-0361

Subscription Customer Service and Business Office
2406 Reach Road, Williamsport, PA 17701
(800) 219-1187

Printed in the USA

editorial

AT THE MOVIES

HEY! THIS IS PATRICK and hey! Welcome to the new issue of *Otaku USA* magazine! Once again here we are to bring you the very best in anime, manga, cosplay, games, and much more from the Land of the Rising FUN, aka Japan!

So what do we have in store for you this time? Well ... love is in the air as Michael Goldstein delivers candy, flowers, and a feature on some of the best romantic anime to come down the pike in recent years. The over the top pirate antics of *One Piece: Stampede* are up next as writer Austin Price shows up with a peg leg and a parrot on his shoulder. Before things get too frivolous, Evan Minto breaks the mood with a look at the infamous tear-jerking classic antiwar anime *Grave of the Fireflies*. Then immediately things swing back to a festive mood as Daryl Surat pops out of nowhere in an outfit worthy of *Iron Chef* and cooks up a tasty feature on *Food Wars: The Third Plate*. Up next, Kristina Kotsamanidis dives into the colorful crazy virtual world of *No Game No Life* and Brittany Vincent brings the curtain down with the post-human cyborg shenanigans of *No Guns No Life*.

In between these pulse-pounding features, you'll find our usual departments and surveys of other neat stuff including interviews, manga reviews, cosplay pics a poppin', and reviews of classics both old and new including *Giant Robo*, *Mai Mai Miracle*, *The Magnificent KOTOBUKI*, and more! Yes, even Godzilla, the King of the Monsters, graces our pages this issue!

So what else is going on? Well right now as I sit writing this, it's mid-December in Tokyo. All the tacky Christmas decorations are out in full force, including the ever-popular Colonel Sanders in a Santa suit outside the local KFC. I don't plan on doing any big travel over the holidays, aside from a few days at a hot springs resort to recharge my batteries, but I will be thinking of friends and family back in the States the whole time, yes, even when I feast on Kentucky Fried Chicken on Christmas Eve (a weird tradition in Japan thanks to the magic of seasonal marketing).

While you are reading this magazine post-holidays in the future year of 2020, I'm still sifting through the big events of the year that was 2019. While there were plenty of great new anime shows to enjoy, I think it wound up being even a more major year for anime movies. *Weathering with You*, Makoto Shinkai's highly anticipated followup to his previous blockbuster *Your Name*, proved to be a massive hit, cementing Shinkai as a filmmaker with a Midas touch. The other big success was *Promare*, an eye-popping feature from those rascals from studio TRIGGER (*Kill la Kill*, *Inferno Cop*). Like *Weathering with You*, *Promare* was a wholly original story, not based on an established or proven manga, game, or anime. I can tell you from my own experiences behind the battle lines of anime production that nothing is harder to get financed and put on a screen than original ideas. To congratulations to both *Weathering with You* and *Promare* for bringing new stuff to the table!

There were, of course, other major anime movies released in Japan in 2019, such as Studio 4°C's gorgeous *Children of the Sea* (which was based on a manga, but I digress ...) and Masaaki Yuasa's *Ride Your Wave*. And we'd be remiss if we didn't mention movies based on shows and characters that are already well loved and need no introduction—at least not to anyone reading this magazine!—*One Piece: Stampede* (read all about it this issue!), *Fate/stay night: Heaven's Feel II*, *Made in Abyss Movie 2: Wandering Twilight*, *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Re;surrection*, and even *City Hunter: Shin-juku Private Eyes*!

As much fun as it is to binge watch anime at home, there's nothing like the big screen, and we're happy to see anime films kicking lots of box office butt! Hope to see you at the theater sometime soon! In the meantime, enjoy the new issue of *Otaku USA*!



LETTERS/TEGAMI

Hey *Otaku USA*! It's been a while since I last sent a message. I love you guys so much! I'm now in high school and if I have a bad day, I go straight for your magazine if I have it on hand. Lately, I have been hooked on an anime I've discovered called *Diabolik Lovers* and I can't get enough of it. I was wondering if you guys would maybe do a feature on it if you can. Love you all so much and I hope you keep being amazing.

- Joselynn

Hi Joselynn! Thanks a mint for your message and congratulations on making the big transition to Sweet Valley High (or whatever your local school might be named). If our magazine can help make the ride even a little bit smoother for you, then we've done our job! As for *Diabolik Lovers*, we actually did a feature on *Diabolik Lovers More,Blood* in our May 2016 issue, so you might want to try and hunt that down. We promise more vampire boys at some point in the future, but in the meantime, cast your peepers upon this very page!



Hello *Otaku USA*! I've been reading you guys for about a year, and I've been a subscriber of your magazine for about four months now. As far as being a fan, I've been watching anime ever since my buddy introduced me to *Soul Eater* in my freshman year of high school. Since then I've

the world of shonen anime to explore what else is out there. While we do feature slice-of-life shows in our pages from time to time, *A Silent Voice* seems to have gotten lost in the shuffle. But that's an oversight worth trying to remedy, especially since we'd like to try and

support Kyoto Animation-related productions as much as possible. Having said that, we have run several stories on *A Silent Voice* over at our official website www.otaku-usamagazine.com in the past, so feel free to pop over there and take a look. In the meantime, enjoy the pic from your favorite tale of friendship and redemption on this very page!

Dear *Otaku USA*! I'm a big fan of your magazine and have been read-

ing your publication for three years now. I really enjoy learning about new anime that I haven't watched yet! Your manga reviews help me a lot too when I can't decide what titles to buy next. I wanted to ask if you could include a *Noragami* feature or anime review in your next issue—that would make me a very happy camper! In closing, I would also like to mention the help your magazine has given me these past few years. A lot has happened to me, but when I read your magazine, it made me feel happy again! So, thank you *Otaku USA*!

- Jacey

Hi Jacey! Thanks so much for your message, your positivity, and for letting us know that our magazine has been there to help lend a hand over these last few years. We hope that everything is good and only continues to keep getting better! As for *Noragami*, looking back into

our vault of back issues turns up the info that we ran features on *Noragami* and the sequel series *Noragami Aragato* in our October 2014 and April 2016 issues, respectively! Find 'em if you can! If there's more *Noragami* anime in the future, and we sure hope there will be, you can be sure we will find a way to squeeze some in our pages. In the meantime, take a look around on THIS page ... see anything you like? (Hint: there's a *Noragami* picture ...)

And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to otakuusa@gmail.com!



watched and read tons of anime and manga, mostly of the shonen variety. Lately, though, I've been gravitating toward more slice of life-style shows and movies, with my recent favorite being Naomi Yamada's *A Silent Voice*. This story of friendship and redemption really hit me hard. I was wondering if you have/would do a review of it to spread the word. Thanks for all the hard work you guys put into this awesome magazine, and I hope you guys keep going for a bunch more issues.

- Will

Hi Will! Thanks a bunch for your message! We're super happy that you are not only subscribing to our magazine (thanks thanks!) but that you're also not afraid to venture outside



Neat New Stuff on Our Radar

Pika-Choose Your Partner with Pokémon Engagement Rings



There is perhaps no better or more permanent way to declare your love for someone else AND *Pokémon* than with a Pikachu-themed engagement ring. Japanese jewelry manufacturer U-



© The Pokémon Company International



TREASURE is making this a possibility with a new set of matching wedding rings and a very special engagement ring, both sporting a pair of loving Pikachus and a stylish lightning bolt.

Despite what the entire concept may imply, these are some pretty fancy and reserved designs, and they're available in sterling silver, platinum, and three shades of gold—white, yellow, and rose. Prices vary, from ¥37,400 (about US\$343) for a silver engagement ring to ¥93,500 (\$857) for platinum, and the wedding bands have

similar price points, but they're actually surprisingly reasonable for what they are.

Life-Size Sheryl Nome Arrives for the Ultimate Macross Fan

Want to show your love for *Macross Frontier* and have some impressively deep pockets? KADOKAWA has just the item for you! Following up on a similar Ranka Lee figure introduced back in May of 2019, Kadokawa unveiled a life-size take on *Frontier*'s Sheryl Nome, just in time to commemorate the 35th anniversary of *Macross* and the 25th anniversary of the Dengeki brand.

Like the Ranka figure before it, Sheryl is part of Kadokawa's KDcolle figure brand. She stands at 172cm tall, sports her costume from the song "Lion," and can even sing for you if you connect her to your PC or smartphone.

Pre-orders went live back in November and ran until December 1, with shipping scheduled for May 2020. As for the price and availability, Sheryl costs ¥2,400,000 (about US \$22,000) and is limited to just 10 figures total.



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Re:ZERO's Rem Figure Gets Intimate for Her Birthday



You may have seen *Re:ZERO* heroine Rem in her special birthday lingerie, but you've never seen her like this before. Previously released in June 2017, Rem's lingerie figure from Kadokawa is now available in a glorious Birthday Blue color, based on an illustration by the series' original light novel artist Shinichirou Otsuka.

From translucent effects to a highly



detailed—and absurdly comfortable looking!—pillow base, this 1/7 scale figure features Rem at her most adorable and endearing. Rem is currently expected to ship in May of 2020. To celebrate her birthday or your own with this special figure, it'll cost you just shy of 200 bucks.

© Tappei Nagatsuki, PUBLISHED BY KADOKAWA CORPORATION/Re:ZERO PARTNERS

How Heavy Is This How Heavy Are the Dumbbells You Lift? Figure?

Sakura Hibiki was one of the standout characters in the TV anime adaptation of writer Yabako Sandrovich and illustrator MAAM's *How Heavy Are the Dumbbells You Lift?* manga. The series got plenty of people hyped about working out, and that enthusiasm is sure to carry over to the new Sakura figure from B'full.

We may not know her exact weight in real life (actually, it apparently starts at about 55.4kg before she decides she needs to lose some more), but the 1/7 scale figure version of Sakura stands at 200mm tall and comes with a tight grip on two 1kg dumbbells, which we're willing to bet aren't true to their listed weight either. You can order your own now from the B'full website for ¥12,100 (about US\$111), with Sakura scheduled to ship near the end of January 2020.



©Yabako Sandrovich, MAAM / Shogakukan



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Monster Musume: Everyday Life of Monster Girls

A worthwhile watch for fans of dark fantasy

What's a monster girl? Oh, you know, just your average amalgam of monster and girl. They're gorgeous, mysterious and, well, they'll take some getting used to. How about a sexy lamia for a girlfriend, which means you get a beautiful girlfriend on top and a snake-like serpent body on the bottom? Or how about a black widow woman? These monster girls and more can be found in the hilarious and sultry *Monster Musume*, a standout title for the genre that's well worth exploring. It's more than just a little wacky, but this "everyday life with



monster girls" is exciting from start to finish ... especially if monster girls are kind of your thing.

The series follows Kurusu Kirihito, your average guy, who finds himself face to face with a lamia one day: half-snake, half-woman. Her name is Miia, and she's been assigned to begin living with Kirihito as some sort of weird government program. This shouldn't be too weird, as humanity has been living with "liminals" (human/animal hybrids) for some time, but living with one out of the blue? It turns out Kirihito wasn't the person Miia was supposed to

stay with in the first place, but that doesn't matter too much, so long as Miia has somewhere to stay. That way the government gets its way and can snoop on her interactions and how Kirihito responds.

After that day, Kirihito finds himself welcoming additional monster girls into his home (more like being surprised with them), who government agent Ms. Smith thinks should live with him for the experiment. That includes Papi the harpy and Centorea the centaur, who all have clashing personalities and an overwhelming love for Kirihito himself. In a way, it's just like your typi-



STUDIO/COMPANY
Sentai Filmworks

AVAILABLE
Now

RATING
Not Rated

cal harem anime, except all the women are half-animal. That means they have their own set of unique quirks, and some of them that you wouldn't expect.

Take Suu, an amoeba girl, and Lorelei the mermaid. How does an amoeba girl even exist? Confusing, but there's certainly an explanation. It gets downright crazy in *Monster Musume*, but it's never boring. How does the mermaid get around while on land? She has fins, doesn't she? You'll have to read and see, won't you?

Not every single member of the household is in "love" with Kirihito, though. Centorea the centaur is more of an honorable and chivalrous housemate, and she's very selective about who rides on her back. Surprise! That's her "master," or Kirihito at the moment. While she does hold him in high regard romantically, she thinks of herself as more of his "knight" than his lover, attempting to remain as noble as possible at all times. As you can imagine, these dueling personality types very much come into conflict with each other more than once, but the ladies do end up getting to be pretty good friends as time goes on, even if they're all in love with Kirihito in some way.

Each episode is positively rife with sexual tension, as Miia believes her newfound housemate is meant to marry her. Problem is, just about everyone else does, too. This leads to plenty of infighting among the girls in the house. Like *Love Hina* or just about any other series where there's one beloved male character and plenty of women fighting over him, *Monster Musume* settles into a very familiar pattern. That doesn't mean it's not a blast to watch, though. You're guaranteed to meet characters you've never met before as you watch a house full of liminals adjust to life with Kirihito and vice versa.

It can get quite steamy (Miia's tail is very sensitive) in many places, so it might not be a series you want to watch with family around, but if you're looking for light laughs, romantic comedy sensibilities, and plenty of well-designed and likable monster girls because you're either just getting into the genre or are knee-deep in it, you've come to the right place.

- Brittany Vincent



Osamu Tezuka's Phoenix: Perfect Collection

An eternal life's work, as every living thing is



STUDIO/COMPANY
Media Blasters

AVAILABLE
Now

RATING
13+

Osamu Tezuka is often called the "god" of manga and anime, having pioneered many of the modern conventions and production methodologies still in use today. His works remain resonant to modern audiences; 2019's anime adaptation of his 1960s work *Dororo* was one of the year's best. But Tezuka's most pioneering series is his "life's work" *Phoenix*, so named because he spent

nearly his entire professional life making it. His *Phoenix* manga is an incredibly experimental, ambitious series of self-contained yet inter-linked stories spanning from the dawn of civilization all the way to infinity in which Tezuka ruminated upon the meaning of existence and life itself through the lenses of both Japanese historical and inter-stellar science fiction. Each story in some way involves the



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Phoenix, an eternally reborn bird of fire that personifies the cosmic energies of the universe, whose blood is believed to grant immortality. Following anime adaptations

of select stories in the 1980s—all stellar, all not currently available in the US—in 2004, this 13-episode series was made to adapt some of the other material that had not previously been animated. Considering it was a lavish high-definition co-production between the Japanese public

Giant Robo: The Complete Original OVA Series

The greatest OVA of all time?



STUDIO/COMPANY
Discotek Media

AVAILABLE
Now

RATING
10+

I have been saying it for decades, because it remains true. *Giant Robo: The Day the Earth Stood Still* is the greatest anime OVA series ever created. Nope, not *Gunbuster*. Not even *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*. It's this seven-episode magnum opus of Yasuhiro Imagawa (*Mobile Fighter G Gundam*) that serves as an homage to the works of the legendary Mitsuteru Yokoyama: a pio-

neering manga author in the genres of giant robots, magical girls, psychic espers, ninja, and classical Chinese literature tales of martial heroes. For *Giant Robo* includes all of these things put together, which is a feat never attempted before or since.

Clean, renewable, unlimited energy is readily available thanks to an invention known as the Shizuma Drive, resulting in global prosperity. But a secret organization known as the BF Group seeks to conquer the world in the service of the mysterious Big Fire. With its high-ranking

members, the superhuman Magnificent Ten, individually nigh-unstoppable even before the aid of their army of giant robots, only the Experts stand a chance of defeating them ... except their top agents are absent. But the Experts have an ace up their sleeve: Giant Robo, the most powerful robot on Earth, who obeys the wristwatch-issued commands of an otherwise powerless preteen boy, Daisaku Kusama.

Someone has a vendetta against the creators of the Shizuma Drive and all those who use it and has developed a means to neutralize its functionality, effectively depriving the planet of power. What can a boy and his robot do? Can happiness be achieved without sacrifice? Is this



kind of like watching *Star Wars* if the only thing they ever made was *The Empire Strikes Back*? And can you spot the part that Guillermo del Toro paid homage to in *Pacific Rim*? If you find yourself unconvinced after an episode or two, know this: every episode of *Giant Robo* is better than the last, and the narrative doesn't cheat. Watch to the end and then go back to the beginning and you'll see the foreshadowing was there

broadcast station NHK and New York City public broadcast station WNET, I always thought it strange that no high-definition US release occurred sooner (did it even air on any PBS affiliate?), but now in 2019 we finally have it on Blu-ray.

For those familiar with the manga, the entirety of which remains available from Viz both in print and digital, the stories adapted here are "Dawn," "Resurrection," "Strange Beings," "Sun," and my personal favorite "Future," which while originally the second installment written was the first released by Viz and the final story told here. "Future" is, after all, the conclusion: Tezuka wrote *Phoenix* such that he made the very beginning, then the chronological end, alternating between past and future with each tale told. Fifty years ago, in 1969, Tezuka outlined his plan which he'd been workshoping since the 1950s: "Each story would stand on its own and seem to have nothing to do with the other stories, but the final story would tie everything together—and for the first time, the reader would realize that the structure of the series is such that each story would be just one part of a much longer story." Sadly, Tezuka died in 1989 before writing that final installment. Fortunately, the stories are set so far apart that the primary recurring character is the Phoenix itself, and its appearances are for the most part brief; these are fundamentally stories of the



human condition, often harsh and unflinching. Though each story is drastically different, on the macro level *Phoenix* is about cyclical rebirth; Tezuka employs his "star system"—reusing character designs and presenting each as though they were actors in a troupe playing roles—to convey the idea that the characters are reincarnating. For example, the big-nosed Saruta of antiquity may have been a vicious

murdering bandit, while in the future he is a wise benevolent scientist.

Phoenix brings together top-tier anime talents such as director Ryosuke Takahashi and animation director Akio Sugino to reverentially do justice to the source material, even if it means downplaying the most sobering or graphic content for the sake of television standards. But like with *Giant Robo*, despite the beautiful animation and soundtrack the character designs remain faithful updates to decidedly retro aesthetics and so anime fan enthusiasm to date has been virtually nonexistent as a result. What's more, *Phoenix* is emotionally heavy stuff that isn't suited to either a group viewing environment or a solo binge watch. Each part concludes so cathartically that you probably want to just sit and ruminate on it for a few days; "iyashikei" this is not.

Osamu Tezuka's *Phoenix* has garnered boundless acclaim from critics (add me onto the pile) and praise from its localization team (NYAV Post) as one of the greatest and most important titles the medium has ever produced. The tales told are ultimately hopeful at the grand cosmic level, even if the "us" as we perceive such a thing won't be able to witness it. Such was Tezuka's philosophy: "life itself is that which never ends. And we each have eternal life from the beginning."

- Daryl Surat

all along. Imagawa's most clever directorial feat—one sadly ruined by the original 1990s English dub—involves a flashback sequence we gradually see more of over time. The lines spoken remain unchanged, and by the time you've seen it all they're in a very different context than what they were originally.

Being a Yokoyama pastiche means that characters from several of his notable works appear, repurposed for this story, as explained in the highly thorough liner notes by top *Giant Robo* super-nerd Mike Toole included on disc. Men in Western suits appear alongside Chinese heroes from *The Water Margin*. High technology coincides with samurai and immortal ninja gumshoe inspectors. This also means

the cast is nearly entirely male as only one female character, the Experts of Justice's cheongsam-clad Ginrei, appears in every episode. Hmm, perhaps this is no longer a liability?

Between the Blu-ray quality and the plethora of extras (note: the *Ginrei Special* episodes not done by Imagawa will be released separately), this is the best edition of

Giant Robo ever released. (Full disclosure: I made a minor contribution in providing



bonus materials to this release.) In addition to the Japanese audio and both English dubs, all of the Japanese audio commentaries are here (with all the bits that Media Blasters accidentally cut out in their DVD release restored), plus a brand-new single episode commentary with Les and Mary Claypool reminiscing on some of their earliest anime dub production. There are also making-of featurettes, plus an extensive gallery of production artwork. The design aesthetic of



Giant Robo is undeniably retro, but the animation and leitmotif-heavy orchestral score are top-notch.

Giant Robo was always more popular in the West than in Japan ... and it was never THAT popular here. But perhaps now is the time that changes. Join me in spreading the gospel of *Giant Robo*. Together! Allegiance or death, Big Fire! Recommended!

- Daryl Surat

The Tatami Galaxy

Something of a miracle



STUDIO/COMPANY

Funimation

AVAILABLE

Now

RATING

17+

Funimation's decision to release *The Tatami Galaxy* on Blu-ray strikes me as something of a miracle. In the decade since the company first acquired *Galaxy* for streaming director Masaaki Yuasa has become a big enough name that it was only a matter of time before Funimation reneged on their insistence that they would never grant the series a physical release, yes, but even with a market more

open than ever to Yuasa's idiosyncratic vision the series remains something of a hard sell. While it may at first glance lack for the bold visual experimentation that's become unanimous with Yuasa—Yusuke Nakamura's character designs feel sleek, cute in a manner antithetical to the more abstract stylings seen in Yuasa's *Kaiba* or the lanky ugliness of characters in *Mind Game*, or *Ping Pong*—and while the narrative—chronicling different iterations of an unnamed university junior's life at a Kyoto university—seems dully commonplace when compared to the apocalyptic fantasia of *Devilman Crybaby* or bloody phantasmagoria of *Kemonozume*, *Tatami Galaxy* presents one of the most challenging viewing experiences Yuasa's ever devised.

It's not that the unique instances of the narra-



tor's life interweave in any structurally challenging way; episodes call back to one another and build on details from earlier adventures but might as easily be enjoyed for their individual qualities. Nor does Yuasa hide his thematic concerns beneath layers of obscurantist metaphors and pretentious musings: the last episode finds

the hero stating plainly that the various failures he's lamented have in fact made his life far richer than the fantasy he once envisioned. What's most challenging in *Galaxy* is its tendency to turn information of all forms—visual and verbal and aural—into a kind of assault; there's an almost diarrhoeatic quality to the slew of ver-

biage and cuts and pans and stylistic shifts and leit-motifs and musical cues

apparent from the very first frame that demands unflinching attention lest the viewer be overwhelmed. Yuasa seems to have found no stray thought of the narrator's, no visual trick or unconventional animation technique or wacky character design that wasn't worth indulging and so renders nothing simply. Characters in conversation don't merely sit and talk but contort wildly with their emotions, expand with the drink and food they ingest and physically explode with feelings. Exposition about his decision to join a book club is delivered not as simple, dry recollection but as the narrator paddling his boat across a sea of words, while an overview of his time in a glori-



cerebral. Rather, the explosion of details suggests Yuasa is focused on crafting an experience where nothing should be missed because he truly believes nothing deserves to be taken for granted. The endless variety of visual shifts, the eclectic soundtrack, the endless patter of words: it all

fied group of hall monitors is rendered in quick cuts from dossiers and silhouettes and infographics and ominous boardrooms that suggest involvement in the Illuminati. It's a world almost overwhelmingly alive.

Fans might have hoped for a dub on this release so they might better divide their attention between the competing stimuli but yet there's something of a disguised blessing in it being subtitle-only as it forces viewers to pause frequently the better to pay attention. Because while this deluge of details might play at first as preciousness or insight into the narrator's mind it's finally revealed as one of untrammelled joy. *The Tatami Galaxy* is the story of a young man coming to appreciate the beauty in the everyday, after all, and what better way to convey



that than to lend every last mundane detail or quotidian task a zest and an antic energy that ultimately prove transformative? It's not that Yuasa intends every single moment be parsed or analyzed or debated over; *The Tatami Galaxy's* interests are more emotional than



exists to capture something of life's own elusive vital quality. If it overwhelms from time to time, well, so too does life: that Yuasa so accurately captures so much of that only proves his success, his genius. **Recommended.**

- Austin Price

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The Magnificent KOTOBUKI

In-flight entertainment



STUDIO/COMPANY

Sentai Filmworks

AVAILABLE

Now

RATING

Not Rated

Flap your arms as much as you want; you'll never take to the skies like a bird or bee without the aid of technology. Since the dawn of civilization, mankind has looked with envy toward all that soars. We've conquered the land and sailed the seven seas, yet exploring the world above the clouds long appeared relegated to the realm of imagination, from the legend of Icarus and his waxen wings to Leonardo da Vinci's

sketches of fanciful flying machines. But when there's a challenge, intrepid individuals rise to the occasion, and by the 18th century, great strides in aviation had been made, particularly in ballooning. It would take over a hundred years more for the Wright brothers to accomplish the first sustained, controlled, and powered flight in a manned heavier-than-air craft. Practical airplanes soon followed, and given the nature of man, this invention was weaponized almost immediately, seeing extensive use dur-



Mai Mai Miracle

A thousand-year dream arrives after 10



STUDIO/COMPANY

Nozomi Entertainment

AVAILABLE

Now

RATING

13+

Sunao Katabuchi established himself as the bona fide successor (but not imitator) to his old mentor, the late Isao Takahata of Studio Ghibli fame, with 2016's *In This Corner of the World*. The extended edition, *In This Corner (And Other Corners) of the World* will have been released in Japanese theaters by the time you read this, but Katabuchi couldn't have made that without first

creating 2009's *Mai Mai Miracle*, a film adaptation of writer Nobuko Takagi's 2004 novelized autobiography *Maimai Shinko* (the original Japanese title of this movie translates to "Maimai Shinko and the Millennium Magic"). If you've not heard of Takagi, the Japanese government recently declared her a Person of Cultural Merit: a distinction given to people such as Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli and Shigeru Miyamoto of Nintendo. If you've not heard of *Mai Mai Miracle*, well, that's because if

there's one downside to the rise of simulcasts and VODs, it's that the US anime industry now struggles with theatrical Japanese animated films that are NOT tied in with an existing franchise. Like with *In This Corner of the World*, *Mai Mai Miracle* was years ago written off as



© Nobuko Takagi / magazine House "Maimaishinko" Film Committee

ing both world wars. In *The Magnificent KOTOBUKI*, a high-flying aerial combat series animated by GEMBA, it's the Japanese aircraft of the Pacific War that take center stage, while eschewing the historical setting.

Based in the city of Rahama, the KOTOBUKI Flight Corps is a six-member, all-female squad of mercenary fighter pilots, currently serving the Ouni Company. Amid a climate of political upheaval and lawlessness, these young women—Reona, Zara, Emma, Kate, Chika, and Kylie—are typically hired to defend people, places, and cargo from the prevalent threat of air pirates, and their vehicle of choice is the Hayabusa, an agile but unarmored fighter. Each has a custom paint job reflecting the unique personalities of the girls, and time is spent on further defining the characteristics of our leads. But let's get real. Similar to *Girls und Panzer*, a prior project by director Tsutomu Mizushima, the cute, quirky cast is thrown in merely to broaden the appeal of *The Magnificent KOTOBUKI*. This show is, first and foremost, a love letter to warplane otaku, and the premise of each episode serves as an excuse to depict spectacular dogfights, featuring a smorgasbord of real-life aircraft, such as Shidens, Hiens, Suisais, and Hiryus.

Each of these antique propeller planes is lovingly rendered in CG, with attention paid to the smallest of details. The human component of *The Magnificent KOTOBUKI* isn't quite so con-



© The Magnificent KOTOBUKI



sistent. The main characters are almost always in CG, background characters are usually hand-drawn, and the supporting cast switches back and forth seemingly at random. The mixture can, at times, feel jarring but all comes together beautifully in flight. The action is captured from

all variety of dramatic angles, sweeping to and fro, even offering first-person perspectives from the cockpit, so those prone to motion sickness may want to refrain from binge-watching.

The excellent audio must be highlighted as well. Composer Shiro Hamaguchi, who also worked on *Girls und Panzer*, deserves kudos for a bombastic orchestral score that heightens the tension as bogeys give chase, and the satisfying, meaty sound effects provide a visceral punch to the copious gunfire and explosions. Between the sharp tings of bullets ricocheting off metal and the chugging rat-a-tat-tat of blasting machine guns, the battlefield comes alive, as if the viewer is truly in the midst of it.

Whenever a piece of Japanese media takes inspiration from World War II, there is always the question of if it romanticizes Imperial Japan, which can be unsavory to foreign audiences. Thankfully, while *The Magnificent KOTOBUKI* justifiably treats its subjects as marvels of engineering, it also regards them as the machines they are. Each has its pros and cons in design, and they can be controlled by the virtuous and villainous alike, any model against any other. Aviation buffs stand to gain the most from *The Magnificent KOTOBUKI*, though the realism of the aerial maneuvers may leave grounds for nit-picking, but even those who don't know a fuselage from a fuel gauge can appreciate the exhilarating thrill of overcoming gravity.

- Kristina Kotsamanidis

"too Japanese" and "too commercially nonviable" to the point where it, too, had to rely on crowdfunding and multiple festival awards to see the light of day here. For those curious: Nozomi Entertainment's release is identical to the UK-based Anime Limited release from back in 2014 aside from being Region "A" for North America instead of Region "B" for Europe.

Mai Mai Miracle is about one year in the life of Shinko, an elementary school girl in rural 1950s Japan whose ailing grandfather has regaled her with stories of life on these lands a thousand years ago. Shinko's hair sports a cowlick on her forehead, which she refers to as her "mai mai" and alleges this lets her see into the past, imagining that world of long ago. When a new transfer student, Kiiko, arrives from Tokyo and is picked on for her higher-class metropolitan fashions, the energetic and cheerful Shinko befriends her. The reserved and forlorn Kiiko is thus introduced to the world as Shinko sees it, both real and imagined, as their actual relationship juxtaposes a fictional one of antiquity between an energetic yet lonely princess looking to befriend a solemnly silent castle servant.

The nontraditional plot progression brought about by the fact that real life doesn't exactly follow a three-act structure combined with a general lack of action or high fantasy elements—there's no actual time travel, as

"Millennium Magic" is metaphorical for youthful imagination—makes *Mai Mai Miracle* a film ABOUT young kids that isn't strictly FOR them, since the childhood experience depicted is unrelatable to anybody under the age of say, 35. Who else might remember playing unsupervised outdoors all day and night, in a world where digital electronics weren't omnipresent? There is a world where it was still possible to say, build a dam with the neighborhood kids out of rocks and discarded pieces of wood, or investigate a cave that was assuredly a bandit's den, or some other shared imagination devised entirely from one's own minds rather than an already provided scenario.

Originally marketed toward children, *Mai Mai Miracle* floundered until word of mouth revealed its true audience was middle-aged viewers and older. Katabuchi's attention to period detail in depicting places and objects long gone from our modern existence—not just from ancient Japan of a thousand years ago, but the 1950s—stems from location scouting and historical research, having visited the places Nobuko

Takagi grew up in. That school building and shrine are actual places; Shinko marvels at the gas flame-powered refrigerator in Kiiko's newly developed home. These details may not necessarily be directly noticed by a viewer (unless maybe you're me interviewing Katabuchi in the



Spring 2015 *Anime USA*, available digitally!), but it's the same meticulous approach that made *In This Corner of the World* (and yes, *Black Lagoon*) so memorable. Hopefully this leads to there finally being a US release of Katabuchi's prior film, *Princess Arete*!

- Daryl Surat

How Heavy Are the Manga You Lift?

New manga reviews



PUBLISHER
Denpa

STORY AND ART
Hiroyuki Asada

RATING
T+

Pez

Wandering through a bleak and possibly post-apocalyptic landscape, young Pez and her friend Decosuke search for a place. Maybe it's somewhere warm, or somewhere quiet, or somewhere with a lot of food, or somewhere to fit in. Asada, creator of *Tegami Bachi: Letter Bee*, weaves a full-color spell in muted blues with spots of warmth, all glued together with melancholy.

This dreamy, mysterious and faintly hopeful manga comprises short vignettes that first ran in *Robot* magazine. The book clocks in at a slim 71 pages, but it's as beautiful as it is inscrutable. Homeless and without family, Pez has little knowledge or education, and her misconceptions about the world create a faint sense of humor that lightens the characters' endless quest to find food and survive to the next day. Wearing an old reel of film as a scarf, Pez carries on with ever renewed faith that she and Decosuke will always find something new out there in the wilderness.

Asada's glorious art sells the series. *Pez* lacks the inventive worldbuilding of *Tegami Bachi*, though the two manga could easily share a setting. Each chapter of *Pez* is a self-contained story, a little thin on the plot front but rich in atmosphere and imagination. The travelers make pizza in a cliffside ruin, Pez is captured by a mad scientist, and a flashback explains how Decosuke became a brain in a box. The price point is on the high side for only 71 pages, even if they are in full color. But both new and die-hard fans of Asada are in for a treat. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media

STORY AND ART
Makoto Hagino

RATING
T

A Tropical Fish Yearns for Snow

Timid Konatsu moves from Tokyo to a small seaside town, where she's thrilled to discover that the high school has its own aquarium, maintained by students and open to visitors. (According to the artist's notes, the story was inspired by a real school with an educational on-site aquarium, so this isn't just



© Hiroyuki Asada/Wanimagazine, Co., Ltd.

another improbable manga conceit.) Despite aquariums being objectively awesome, the school's Aquarium Club has only one member, Koyuki Honami, one of those beautiful, flawless, universally worshipped teen goddesses ubiquitous in high-school manga. ("Honami is kind and pretty! She's beyond all reach, like a lofty flower!") But in fact Koyuki is on such a high pedestal she has no friends, and no one realizes she's actually

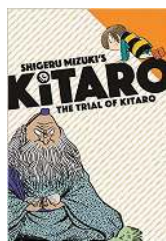
shy and socially awkward. When Konatsu joins the Aquarium Club, the two introverts get a chance to find friendship, and maybe more, at last.

A Tropical Fish is gentle to a fault, sharing quiet moments of bonding between the protagonists with a minimum of either internal or external conflict. The perspective moves back and forth between the two leads, making it less about their individual journeys than about the nurturing of



their relationship, a friendship forever tantalizingly on the verge of developing into romance.

If the story is slow and fairly predictable, the setting, based on the artist's hometown in southerly Ehime Prefecture, adds some distinctiveness. The girls stroll along the seaside, care for the aquarium, learn about the ocean and sea creatures, and have visions of talking salamanders. The simple, friendly art excels at cute marine animals and beachside neighborhoods. It's a sweet, low-stakes story about nice people finding each other in a beautiful setting, and sometimes that's all a manga needs to be. (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Drawn & Quarterly

STORY AND ART
Shigeru Mizuki

RATING
Unrated/All Ages

The Trial of Kitaro

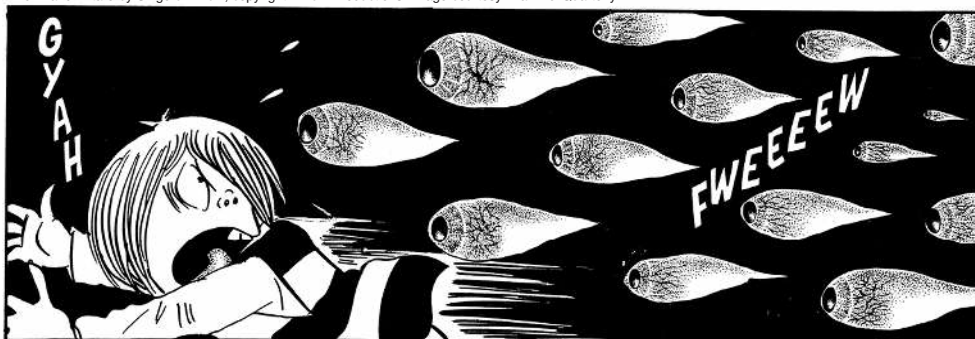
The first thing I noticed when reading *The Trial of Kitaro*, the final Drawn & Quarterly collection of Shigeru Mizuki's classic manga, is that it's an old enough piece of children's entertainment that the monsters can be truly ugly. Heck, Kitaro himself is a monster child led around by the ghost of his father in the form of a disembodied eye! The yokai, traditional Japanese monsters

and spirits, look more like Maurice Sendak drawings than the cuddly pet-like creatures in manga like *Yokai Watch* or *Pokémon*. This stories in this volume originally ran in 1969, when even the Muppets on *Sesame Street* were more monstrous than they are today.

Given the truly frightening creature design and the fact that *Kitaro* hails from an older, wilder



The Trial of Kitaro by Shigeru Mizuki, copyright Mizuki Productions. Image courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.



era of manga, one might expect the titular "Trial of Kitaro" to be a brutal spectacle. It is not. Ugly and vengeful as they may be, these yokai have an admirable devotion to the rule of law. The story exemplifies the one downside of *Kitaro*: the storylines tend to end abruptly. Kitaro goes to Hell (which is used interchangeably with the "yokai world") and put on trial for undue kindness to humans, but at the end the monsters just let him go. My inner continuity geek was screaming, "The cosmological ramifications of this story are staggering!"

The second story is much more disturbing, as a yokai turns people into mochi and eats their

innards. As Kitaro's father explains, "It eats the underwear and leaves the clothes." Once again, this is a Grimm's fairy tale approach to children's literature. As someone who started reading manga in the "oh my God, Zatch Bell can't mention boobs" era of the 2000s, I find it refreshing. Besides Shigeru Mizuki's yokai being high-octane nightmare fuel, *Kitaro* has other differences from modern manga. The pages are full of blunt descriptive captions—not the kind of flowery prose you'd find in Tezuka's *Phoenix* or a 1970s superhero comic, but just text that says exactly what the reader has already seen on-panel. *Kitaro* shows its roots in children's books and other pre-manga literature.

It's not just the imaginative horror stories that sell this volume. The extensive introduction is informative enough to make me feel like an expert on a series I didn't know existed last week. There have been a lot of forgettable manga about yokai. Having read *Kitaro*, I now know what every crappy series with the word "exorcist" in the title was reaching for and never quite grasping. *Kitaro* is quite a work and I want to read more.

Recommended. (Robert McCarthy)



PUBLISHER

Yen Press

STORY

Kei Sazane

ART

Okama

CHARACTER DESIGNS

Ao Nekonabe

RATING

T

Our Last Crusade: or The Rise of a New World

The immediate comparison to *Our Last Crusade* is *Romeo and Juliet*, but this story of star-crossed love is also steeped in magic, politics, daring swordsmen, and warring empires. One hundred years ago, a magical power source was discovered that bonds with certain people, giving them magic powers. In response, the all-powerful Empire began a campaign of oppression to contain the "witches." Rebel witches formed the Nebulis

Sovereignty and the Grand Witch Nebulis bathed the Empire in flame. Now the two nations are locked in a war with no end in sight.

But two visionaries on opposing sides may break the stalemate. Iska, a gifted young swordsman, has been jailed as a traitor for freeing child-witches from the Empire's prisons. He is given a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of the government when the greatest witch since Nebulis herself takes out one of the Empire's weapons. Princess Alice, aka the Ice Calamity Witch, aka a full name that's too long to type, wields the devastating power of ice. Sparks and ice shards fly when Iska and Alice meet on the battlefield. Both of them want to end the war, and after multiple encounters their animosity turns into romance.

Our Last Crusade is a solid romance-meets-action shonen manga. As in a lot of boys' romance manga, there are lots of revealing costumes, boobs, and jokes about women's underwear. But the manga also has interesting political intrigue, solid action, and a meet cute over pasta. Okama's art is smooth, balancing pages of light screen tones and open spaced panels with dense spot blacks for contrast. And though the fanservice is gratuitous, of course there's always a handy scrap of fabric to keep the rating teen-friendly. (Che Gilson)

Jujutsu Kaisen

Yuji Itadori, a spiky-haired blond shonen manga punk, has the ability to see supernatural phenomena, which is how he discovers the extracurricular curse-fighting work carried out by Megumi Fushiguro, a spiky-haired brunet shonen manga



JUJUTSU KAISEN © 2018 by Gege Akutami/SHUEISHA Inc.



PUBLISHER

Viz Media

STORY AND ART

Gege Akutami

RATING

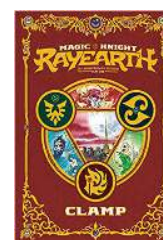
T+

of plot. Eventually Yuji and Fushiguro enroll in a secret school of jujutsu sorcery ("The curses in Tokyo are on a whole other level!"), and the manga decides what it wants to be: *Naruto* with grittier art. The two boys are joined by a haughty girl, Kugisaki, and taken under the tutelage of a jujutsu master who doesn't even try not to look like *Naruto*'s ninjutsu master Kakashi.

To call the story derivative would be an understatement. In addition to borrowing wholesale from *Naruto*, it lifts elements from manga including, but not limited to, Go Nagai's *Devilman*, Hitoshi Iwaaki's *Parasyte*, Yellow Tanabe's *Kekkaishi*, and even Osama Tezuka's demon-fighting classic *Dororo*. (Then there's the artist's pen name, a play on Shigeru Mizuki's *GeGeGe no Kitaro*.) At least it steals from the best. The original details are often clever, like Kugisaki's mastery of voodoo dolls, or a confrontation with a weird floating "curse womb" in the sky.

The big draw is the great monster art, with lots of graphic violence and creepy creatures: buglike, froglike, crablike, gross, and hairy. It's a shame the human characters aren't as interesting to look at, but the anatomy is solid and the fight scenes

are intense and dynamic. If *Jujutsu Kaisen* is still searching for its own voice, at least it has its look nailed. (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER

Kodansha

STORY AND ART

CLAMP

RATING

13+

Magic Knight Rayearth Manga Box Set

Magic Knight Rayearth was the first megahit for manga superteam CLAMP, and it remains one of the group's best-loved series. The story of three schoolgirls recruited to save a fantasy realm mixes magical girl shojo fantasy with speedline-heavy shonen action and elements of video games (something the characters themselves comment on).

Rayearth was one of the first shojo manga brought to the US by Tokyopop back in the 1990s, and now Kodansha has revived it in a gorgeous oversized hardcover box set that includes the three-volume original series and an art book.

Spunky tomboy Hikaru, elegant rich girl Umi, and smart, sensitive Fuu are visiting Tokyo Tower when they're whisked away to the land of Cephiro, given magic powers and weapons, and dispatched to battle the wizard Zagato. Cephiro is an RPG-style fantasy world before they were cool—sometimes to a ridiculous degree, as when the girls wander into empty houses and take things as they would if they were video game characters. But CLAMP perks up the setting with colorful visuals: giant animals, mountains floating in the clouds, and clever ideas like a hidden spring that only exists in two dimensions.

The plot breaks down into a series of miniquests the Knights have to complete before taking on Zagato; they get armor upgrades, acquire cool animal mecha, and fight monsters and scantily clad sorceresses along the way. To the modern reader, their adventure may come off as formulaic, especially since countless manga and anime have ripped off *Rayearth* even more than *Rayearth* ripped off its own inspirations (classic RPGs, of course, but also the battle manga *Saint Seiya/Knights of the Zodiac*, one of CLAMP's favorite subjects back in its fanart days).

But the likable heroines, the bright, energetic artwork, and the sprightly combination of shonen manga action and shojo manga style remain irresistible. It's simple, fast-paced, and fun (at least until the surprisingly dark climax), and it looks fantastic, especially in this new deluxe edition. Part of the secret to *Rayearth*'s success is that it has something for everyone, so don't miss out.

Recommended. (Shaenon K. Garrity)

Bakemonogatari

The long-running light novel series by Nisiosin gets the manga treatment in *Bakemonogatari*. Koyomi Araragi, a seemingly normal teenage boy, catches a girl named Hitagi Senjogahara one day



PUBLISHER
Vertical Comics
ORIGINAL STORY
Nisiosin
ART
Oh!Great
CHARACTER DESIGNS
Vofan
RATING
16+

when she slips on a banana peel. When Araragi catches Hitagi, however, he realizes she weighs almost nothing. Hitagi threatens Araragi with grave bodily harm—via the arsenal of office supplies she wields like a ninja—if he reveals her secret. But far from wishing to expose her, Araragi wants to help. He takes Hitagi to visit Meme Oshino, a grumpy spiritualist who deals with aberrations.

The book does a good job of explaining what's going on for readers new to the series, and fans of the novels will enjoy the nods to continuity. The characters

are well written, though Araragi is a bit too “average Joe” for a thriller. He’s neither endearingly hapless nor savvy enough to be interesting, especially when up against the haughty and contrary Hitagi.

The conceit of *Bakemonogatari* is that monsters are around us all the time. They largely ignore humans, but sometimes a deed or accident draws their attention to an individual, usually to the human’s detriment. Oh!Great’s art is more realistic than in other works such as *Ten-jou Tenge*, but as stunning as ever. The solid blacks contribute to the horror ambience and the characters look great even if Oh!Great didn’t invent the character designs.

But while you can take the porn artist out of porn, you can’t take the porn out of the artist—which may be exactly why Oh!Great was chosen

for this book. There are plenty of fanservice shots of Hitagi in her underwear, Hitagi in a towel, Hitagi in a negligee, and so on. But it’s trademark Oh!Great and every panel is perfection. The perspective, anatomy, and inking are all on point, and nothing looks or feels over-worked. Beautiful art and an engaging story come together in a capable supernatural thriller. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Kodansha
STORY
Shigemitsu Harada
ART
Issei Hatsuoyoshiya
CREATED BY
Akane Shimizu
RATING
18+

Cells at Work: Code Black

Akane Shimizu’s *Cells at Work* introduced manga readers to the marvelous truth of what happens inside the human body: each one of us is filled with millions of plucky blue-collar workers, wearing jump-suits and working specialized tasks to keep the heart pumping, the lungs breathing, and every organ dealing with the challenges of multicellular life. Perhaps hardest working of all are the red blood cells, rushing around the entire body bearing oxygen and thus getting to

meet all the other cell types. It’s a great concept for an educational manga, so great that there have been no fewer than four spinoff manga, of which the “adult” spinoff is *Cells at Work: Code Black*.

Not tremendously more violent or nudity-packed than the original *Cells at Work* (except for the cleavage-heavy white blood cell who’s one of the main characters, and one panel of a naked kupffer cell), *Code Black* earns its 18+ rating by dealing with the problems of adult (specifically, adult male) bodies. “Lack of sleep, binge eating, binge drinking ... this body is currently under extreme stress!” proclaims a cell in the first panel.

Though (as in all the *Cells at Work* manga) we never see the outside of the body, *Code Black*’s hapless cells seem to be inside some debauched salaryman, as in chapter after chapter they deal with the health problems of smoking, drinking, erectile dysfunction, sexually transmitted disease, and stress-based hair loss. And that’s just in the first volume! Going from crisis to crisis with helpful captions explaining the science, it’s increasingly over the top, though it’s hard to beat the, er, climax in Chapter 3, which is essentially a Woody-Allen-less version of the “what happens inside the penis” sequence in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask*. (“Hey rookies, is this your first time in the erectile tissue?”)

Like the original manga, but harder to talk about without cracking an immature smile, it’s an enjoyably straight-faced/ridiculous romp through cell science. (Jason Bradley Thompson)

The Golden Sheep

When her parents get divorced, Tsugu, her mother, sisters, and niece move back to the small



PUBLISHER
Vertical Comics
STORY AND ART
Kaori Ozaki
RATING
14+

hometown in Osaka they left years ago. Now in high school, Tsugu expects to pick up where she and her friends left off. But they're different people now. Yuushin, the boy Tsugu thought was so kind when he was young, has become a bully who harasses Sora, once their mutual friend. Asari, Tsugu's former BFF, has a crush on Yuushin and turns against Tsugu in a fit of jealousy.

Tsugu's only consolation in these troubled times is playing her beloved guitar, a gift from her rock musician dad.

Ozaki handles the story with nuance and delicacy.



PUBLISHER
Kodansha
STORY AND ART
Cocho & Makoto Fugetsu
RATING
13+

cacy, carefully developing each character and slowly revealing the years that changed them in flashbacks. Each character has understandable motives and sympathetic features. The art is equal to the story, clean and organic with detailed backgrounds that give the characters a real environment to inhabit. Each scene is well balanced and the art furthers the emotion and the plot. The

character designs are lively and expressive, perfect for a teen drama.

The result is an engrossing book peppered with conflict, realistic issues (TW: suicide), and humor. There are moments of genuine warmth, both familial and between Tsugu and her friends as they try to reassert their former closeness. But cracks have formed between them. Ozaki spends just enough time indulging Tsugu's rosy nostalgia before pulling the rug out from under her and the readers. The organic nature of the drama drives the story forward with well-crafted tension, making for an engaging coming-of-age tale.

Recommended. (Che Gilson)

Granblue Fantasy

In a world of floating islands, teenage Gran lives a peaceful life on the island of Zinkenstill while training diligently for his lifelong dream: to follow in the footsteps of his father, a traveler who left him with the message, "I shall be waiting on Estalucia, the Isle of Stars." Then one day a flying battleship appears overhead and a mysterious girl in a flimsy dress runs into Gran's arms, sobbing, "Please help me!" The girl is Lyria, who has the magical ability to summon monsters, and the battleship is from the evil Erste Empire, which wants Lyria's power.

Together with bare-midriffed knight Katalina, Vyrn the talking mini-dragon, and an ever-growing cast of fellow party members, Gran and Lyria must go on the run to escape the evil empire and its army of helmeted goons and maniacally laughing generals. But can they ever defeat such powerful enemies and make it to Estalucia, "at the end of the sky"?

Based on the Android/iOS/web game, *Granblue Fantasy* is barely five years old but feels weirdly retro in the 2020 world of isekai fantasy: a fantasy manga that's not self-aware, not snarky, that's just about a noble young hero fighting an evil empire in a land of dragons and airships? The high fantasy feeling is perfected by the excellent art; Cocho renders every cool character, summoned monster, and sunset skyscape with lavishly screentoned beauty. Everything looks so good you keep reading despite the tired tropes. Incompetent, effeminate bad guys, check; magical princess who mostly cries and apologizes for existing, check.

An equally big problem is the unsatisfying game-based story structure, where the entire first volume feels like buildup and fights that could have been cool zip by in two panels because the artist has another 10,000 game characters to introduce. But even if *Granblue Fantasy* doesn't nail the *One Piece* shonen manga feel of adventure waiting around every bend, it's hard not to want to see a Cocho art book. (Jason Bradley Thompson)

An Incurable Case of Love

After a life-changing encounter with Dr. Kairi Tendo, a handsome and seemingly caring pulmo-



WES ANDERSON'S ISLE OF DOGS © 2019 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.



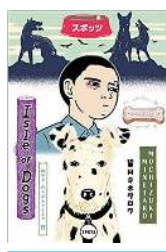
PUBLISHER
Viz
STORY AND ART
Maki Enjoji
RATING
13+

nologist, teenage Nanase decided to become a nurse. But four years later, when she starts work at a hospital and meets Tendo again, she's shocked to find that his kindness to his patients is matched by rudeness to his colleagues. What's more, he's not at all impressed to learn that she's been stalking him: "I can't believe you'd have such a ridiculous motive for coming here! You're a nuisance. Quit already!" Angered by his rejection, Nanase persists, and her romantic feelings shift into professional pride. "I just want him to acknowledge me as a nurse!" she declares. But as they work together day after day, Nanase starts to see cracks of warmth in Dr. Tendo's icy façade. Could he really be a nice guy after all? And what a coincidence that they turn out to be next-door neighbors!

An Incurable Case of Love is a shojo manga for people who enjoy medical dramas but aren't interested in medicine or in 95% of the characters. Despite the medical setting, the manga has a teenage perspective: the affable doctors inviting Nanase to join their departments sound like upperclassmen in a high school manga recruiting for after-school clubs. ("It's almost time for you to choose your department, isn't it? Come over to gastroenterology!" "Come to neurosurgery!") Other YA-manga-isms peek through as well, like

the awkwardly translated nicknames: Nanase's colleagues call her "Val-Sakura" (short for "Valiant Sakura") and Dr. Tendo gets nicknamed "dark lord" ("Ha ha ha! She called him Dark Lord! That's a good one!").

It's a sign of the artist's professionalism that this brainless popcorn romance reads so smoothly; the formula works. Fans of Maki Enjoji's previous translated manga, the arranged-marriage fantasy *Happy Marriage*, are likely to enjoy it, while other readers may want to consider how they feel about kisses as shock therapy or uncomfortable scenes of the protagonist being sexually harassed until Dr. Tendo saves her. (Jason Bradley Thompson)



PUBLISHER
Dark Horse

STORY AND ART
Minetaro Mochizuki

ORIGINAL STORY
Wes Anderson

RATING
All Ages

Isle of Dogs

Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs*, a science fiction fable of a dog-free future Japan where canines are exiled to an island of trash, was acclaimed for its stylish stop-motion animation but got a more mixed reaction for its exoticized Japanese setting. In Japan, however, it was a heavily promoted release, with lots of Japanese voice actors and even this short tie-in manga drawn by industry veteran Minetaro Mochizuki. In

contrast to the detailed post-apocalyptic landscapes of his other translated manga, *Dragon Head*, Mochizuki here uses an almost under-ground stripped-down style, with stiff, near-expressionless figures delineated in thick black and white. Whereas the stop-motion dogs in the movie look cute enough to pet, in Mochizuki's uncute style they look like they'd gladly rip Atari's arms out of their sockets.

Story-wise, the adaptation follows the film in an ultra-stripped-down way, the main differences being ditching the American transfer student and taking the perspective of 12-year-old Atari, who bravely goes to the forbidden island in search of his beloved Spots. (In the manga, Atari's dialogue is translated, unlike the movie where Japanese humans speak Japanese and dogs and Americans speak English.) With a lot of heart and a few "sushi-flavored Ninja Dog Biscuits," Atari soon wins the trust of the feral dogs, even the untrusting Chief, who was abandoned by humans after he bit a boy.

Touching dialogue about the love between dogs and humans is the story's center ("Your lives are lived so much faster than ours ... one of my days is five or more of yours") and there are a few weird Mochizuki-isms, like anti-dog drones shaped like flying vacuum cleaners ("the eternal enemy of dogs!"). At just 76 pages, however, it's over almost as soon as it begins, and doesn't justify its existence except as a curiosity and a collector's item for *Isle of Dogs* megafans. (Jason Bradley Thompson)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas

STORY AND ART
Sandrovich Yabako & MAAM

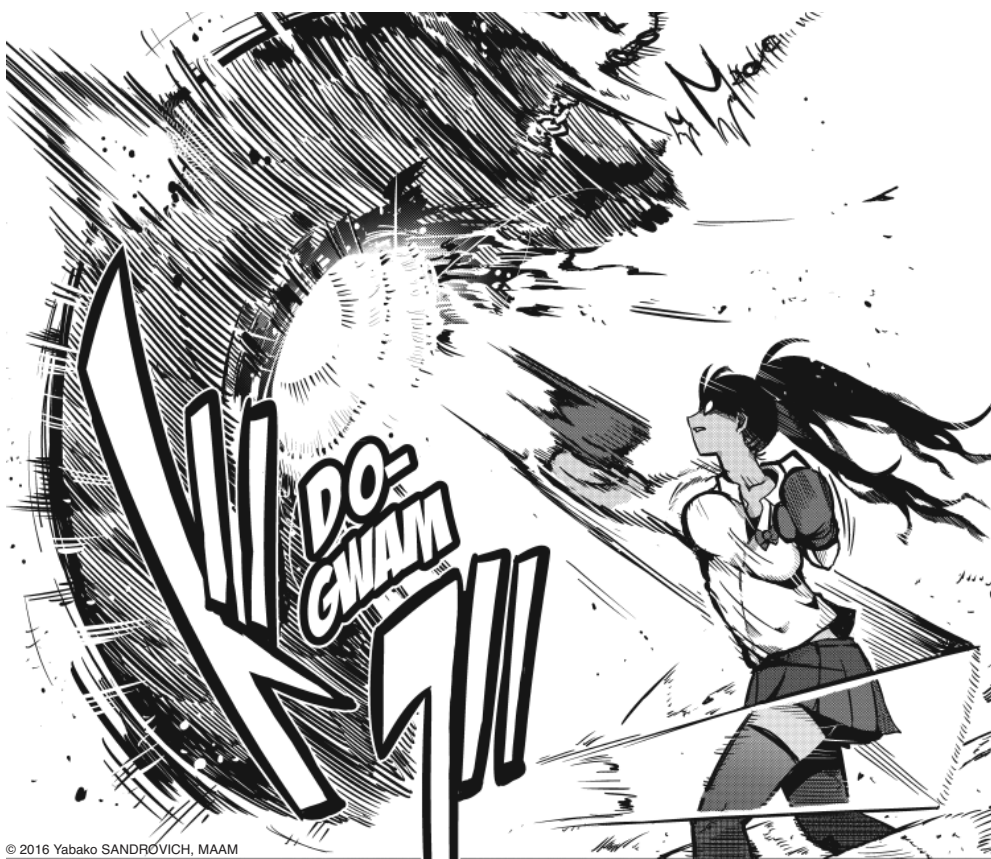
RATING
OT

How Heavy Are the Dumbbells You Lift?

High school "gal" Hibiki Sakura is looking to drop a few pounds, and after having trouble staying motivated she ventures into Silverman Gym, where the power-lifting clientele is intimidating to a newbie. Her reluctance is overcome by the presence of two people: beautiful student council president Akemi Soryuin, who turns out to have a thing for big, beefy guys (which keeps her motivated!), and baby-faced Naruzo Machio, who

of saucy fanservice makes strength training accessible to readers who might not think they want to read a weightlifting manga.

Volume 1 covers roughly the first three episodes of the anime adaptation, already available in English from Funimation; it's worth noting that the anime revised the female characters' outfits to tone down the underboob on display here. Also included are four-panel bonus comics as well as a list of books Sandrovich cites as research for the instructional interludes. Anything that simultaneously references *Fist of the North Star*, Japanese pro wrestling, and American action movies is made for me, despite my sedentary and fatter-than-ever ways. **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)



© 2016 Yabako SANDROVICH, MAAM

works at the gym as the most positive, gentle, nonjudgmental fitness instructor ever ... and whose clothes tear off whenever he flexes to reveal that his handsome face is too tiny for the rest of his ultra-buff body.

Infatuation with muscular physiques aside, *How Heavy Are the Dumbbells You Lift?* is a sharp departure from Sandrovich Yabako's underground MMA series *Kengan Ashura*. Artist MAAM is far more comfortable drawing sexy girls than *Kengan Ashura*'s artist was. The combination of wacky gag comedy, educational content so readers can diet and exercise along, endearing characters who manage to be both wholly relatable and thoroughly outlandish (my favorite is the schoolteacher trying to conceal her cosplay hobby from her students), and a ton



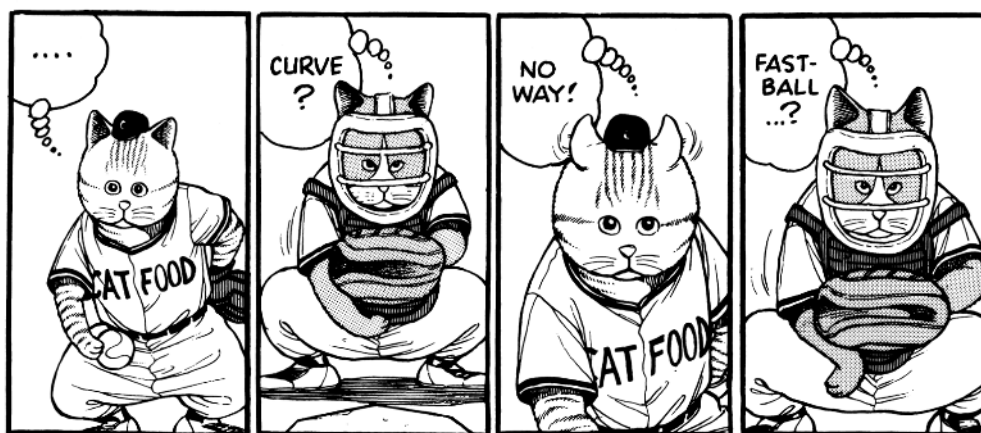
PUBLISHER
Kodansha

STORY AND ART
tMnR

RATING
16+

If I Could Reach You

For years, Uta watched her friend Kaoru fall in love with her brother Rei. The two have now married, and Uta is invited to move in with the newlyweds. What the couple doesn't realize is that Uta is in love with Kaoru, too. As Uta struggles with her unresolved feelings, Kaoru and Rei deal with their own problems as marriage turns out to be rockier than they expected. This yuri manga sets up a complex situation that could deal with the pain of love in different forms. Unfortunately, it doesn't live up to



What's Michael? © 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988 by Makoto Kobayashi. All rights reserved. First published in Japan in 1985 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.



its potential.

While a young woman living with the married object of her secret lesbian desires is a premise rife with drama, the manga keeps missing opportunities to create any. Uta spends most of her time passively pining; other than her wish to be with Kaoru, she doesn't appear to have any desires or discernible personality traits. Potentially interesting subplots, like Uta's relationship with the friend she visits for advice, go nowhere because of Uta's one-track focus on moping over Kaoru. The simplistic art and dialogue don't add much to the story.

With such a great setup, it's possible that this first volume is just testing the waters before diving in. But so far there isn't much to the manga beyond repetitive scenes of the pining Uta and seemingly clueless Kaoru. The title is even a bit misleading: *if Uta could reach Kaoru?* The truth is, there's no reason she can't. Everything would be resolved, for better or worse, if the characters had one serious conversation. Since they refuse to, the manga just sits there waiting for something to happen. (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER
Dark Horse

STORY AND ART
Makoto Kobayashi

RATING
8+

What's Michael? Falcat Collection

I don't have any pets and have never been one for pet manga. One of the few exceptions is *What's Michael?*, Makoto Kobayashi's award-winning 1984 cat manga, now back in print in an enormous omnibus edition from Dark Horse. The titular cat, an orange American Shorthair tabby, might

remind you of one of the most famous comic cats, Garfield, but the similarities end there. *What's Michael?* isn't a sitcom, like *Garfield* or *Chi's Sweet Home*—it's a sketch comedy!

There is little to no continuity in the series. Michael appears in different situations in each chapter: adopted by a young couple in one, living with a scatterbrained cat lady in another. This rapid-fire structure allows Kobayashi to mix and match short comedy sketches, never letting any one setting overstay its welcome. The connecting thread is Kobayashi's sardonic amusement at the absurdity of cats and humans living together, with the humans being the butt of the joke as often as the cats. Great comedy is built on great observation, and Kobayashi clearly understands the contradictions of life with an animal. Kobayashi's idiosyncratic art style, much more cartoony than most manga, renders human and cat alike as big, goofy caricatures.

The series also veers into surreal slapstick comedy. In some chapters, the narrator describes questionable cat "facts." (When cats are embarrassed, they start dancing to cover up their mistake.) In others, anthropomorphic cats act out human scenes, including a corporate board meeting, a poker game, and a wrestling match. (It's hard to perform a flying elbow when you always land on your feet.) Some of the funniest sketches are the pop culture parodies. The first volume includes a parody of *The Fugitive* and spoofs on yakuza movies and crime dramas, but we'll have to wait until the next book to get the best one of all: a Michael Jackson dance sequence performed by cats!

What's Michael? is a classic more than deserving of a re-release. Kobayashi's unique art is a lit-

tle dated but has aged surprisingly well, and the trials of cats and their humans transcend time. Cat owners will find *What's Michael?* particularly relatable, but don't be scared off if you're like me and are typically allergic to pet manga. **Recommended.** (Evan Minto)



Goblin Slayer: Brand New Day

When you've read as much shonen manga as I have, you start to like series as much for what they don't have as what they do. *Goblin Slayer* is appealing for its great art by Masahiro Ikeno and the fact that it is not set in a friggin' school. Nobody says the word "exam" in the whole volume! Purists take heart, though: *Goblin Slayer* is a *Dungeons and Dragons*-style fantasy, so the shonen manga fetish for

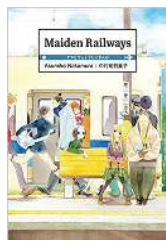
levels and training remains intact. The central mystery is why someone as absurdly powerful as the Goblin Slayer (a Silver level adventurer in a world where levels are based on minerals, so one assumes Silver is fairly badass) is wandering around the forest fighting relatively low-level threats.

One weakness of the *Goblin Slayer* franchise as a work of high fantasy (magic and monsters are all over) is we keep being told that goblins are among the weakest monsters, but most of the story is about fighting goblins. While the Goblin Slayer does in fact slay goblins fairly easily, the goblins give the other human characters a run for their money.

More interestingly, a sizable chunk of the first volume of *Goblin Slayer: Brand New Day* is written from a goblin's perspective. This old fantasy reader got a big laugh when the section from the goblin's perspective starts with a parody of the opening of *The Hobbit*. If that's not a direct translation of the original script, the rewriter deserves a raise! But that's not the most interesting thing from a literary perspective. Usually, when a writer changes point of view, it's to make the reader more sympathetic to an unsympathetic character. Any *X-Men* reader knows the reason to tell a story from Wolverine's perspective is because from a normal person's viewpoint he's a drunken serial killer. But in *Goblin Slayer*, goblins are truly, gleefully evil even from their own point of view. The goblin whose perspective we share is only relatable because he's afraid to get killed. Who wouldn't be? But he also hates everyone, including other goblins, and complains about not being able to assault their human hostage enough, which makes him less than endearing.

Brand New Day is very light on plot, and the cool titular character, who owes a visual debt to Frank Frazetta's *Death Dealer*, is far from the

center of the action. I may not remember any individual character's name, but the next volume has a magic tower, so at least the series promises more for old-school fantasy fans to look at. (Robert McCarthy)



PUBLISHER
Denpa

STORY AND ART
Asumiko Nakamura

RATING
Unrated/T

Maiden Railways

I'll admit it: I'm a bit of a train otaku. I'm a big fan of high-quality public transportation and find the process of navigating an extensive and complex train system oddly enjoyable. *Maiden Railways*, a one-shot by prolific josei artist Asumiko Nakamura (*Utsubora*), is a romance manga for people like me, a series of vignettes exploring relationship drama in and around the

Greater Tokyo Area's sprawling train system. Many of the stories are set along the private Odakyu railway, including the famous Romance-car line between Tokyo and the hot-spring resort of Hakone, so named because of its two-person seats with no armrests.

The short stories tackle familiar drama within (largely straight) relationships, from cheating to breakups to love triangles, but a few incorporate some unexpected twists. One story features a lesbian couple, another centers on a husband's secret weekly visits to a model train club, and there's even a ghost story! Some of the stories are easier to follow than others; josei manga can sometimes get lost in expressionist collages and extreme close-ups. Nakamura's linework is airy and charmingly loose, but readers who aren't well versed in this kind of art and pacing may not always be able to follow what's going on. The



Magie Knight
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Anniversary
Manga Box
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• Shigatsu
Tsutachi Co.,
Ltd./Kodansha
Ltd.

IS NOW
DEPARTING
FOR KATASE-
ENOSHIMA.



PUBLISHER
Denpa

STORY AND ART
TAA

ORIGINAL CONCEPT
Type-Moon

RATING
Unrated/T

sometimes awkwardly worded dialogue, either due to Nakamura's writing or Denpa's translation, doesn't help.

On their own, the stories can be cute, touching or sad, though not all of them end on a particularly satisfying note. Taken together, however, they paint a larger picture. Nakamura turns the transit system into a crossroads of human life, a setting where people pass through and connect with each other on their way to the next part of their journey. It's a short, pleasant read, especially if you're a fan of contemplative josei manga. Or trains, I suppose. **Recommended.** (Evan Minto)

Today's Menu for the Emiya Family

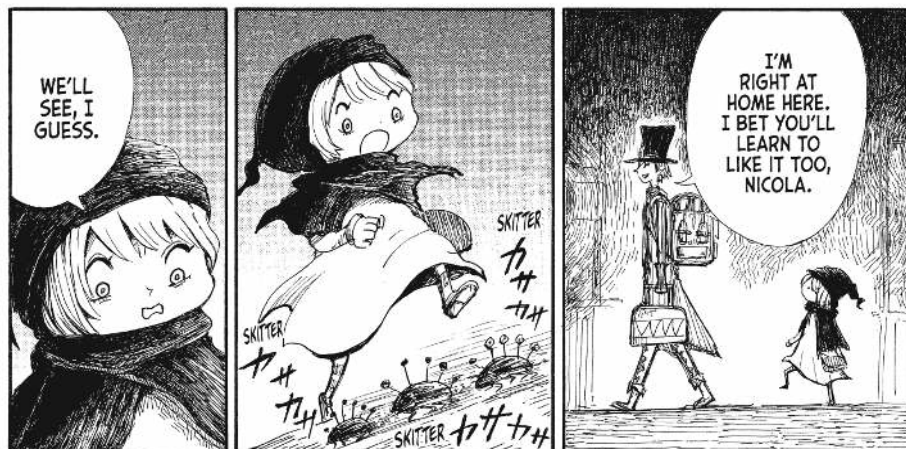
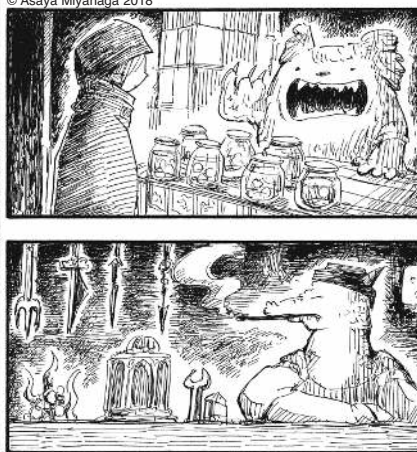
Today's Menu for the Emiya Family has me reflecting on the slow rise of game company Type-Moon and its tentpole franchise, the visual novel series *Fate/Stay Night*. The *Fate* series centers on

battles waged by legendary heroes over a wish-granting trinket called the Holy Grail, but there's so much backstory, spin-off side material, and scattered lore across multiple media that summarizing it all is an exercise in futility. By now it's possible for the franchise to drift amazingly far from its original premise, culminating in this *Fate/Stay Night* cooking manga.

Emiya Family deals with the problem of explaining the complex *Fate* backstory by simply ignoring it, charging forward, and sticking to its premise as a food manga. Artist TAA works with a light and fluffy touch, presenting Fuyuki City as a quiet Japanese neighborhood and not the site of repeated tragedies and ceremonial bouts between



© Asaya Miyanaqa 2018



sociopathic magicians. Beloved bit characters tear through the pages, asking about the Holy Grail War, as orange-haired protagonist Shiro Emiya calmly picks out ingredients for dinner without a care in the world. In this alternate universe, no one cares about fighting and sworn enemies have put aside their differences to eat together. The depiction of Shiro's found-family life is aimed squarely at all the fans who loved the domestic scenes in the visual novels over the battles.

The only action here is in the kitchen, and it's actually informative for readers new to Japanese home cooking. Makoto Tadano is credited on the cover as a "Food Direction" specialist right below Type-Moon's credit for the original concept, and it's clear how much attention has gone into making the cooking process feel real and accessible. At the end of each chapter, a page-length break-

down of the recipe is drawn up for curious readers to try out for themselves. While some dishes might be difficult for Westerners to prepare unless they have access to a specialty store for Asian groceries, there's an encouraging sense that anyone can make the food seen in the manga.

While *Emiya Family* isn't strictly for fans only—it can be enjoyed simply as a cooking manga—familiarity with the games adds a lot. The creators clearly love the *Fate* characters and put effort into capturing their personalities. Trading swords and lances for pots and pans, *Emiya Family* becomes a showcase for home-cooked meals that places as much care in its characters as it does in its food. (David Estrella)

Nicola Traveling Around The Demons' World

Nicola Traveling Around The Demons' World is a



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas

STORY AND ART
Asaya Miyanaqa

RATING
All Ages

storybook fantasy about a little girl who, for one reason or another, has been transported to a land full of monsters. Call it a fairy tale, call it an adventure, just don't call it isekai because it's the farthest thing from a conventional portal fantasy. A rare all-ages title from Seven Seas, which has built its brand around alternative, adult-oriented fare, *Nicola* deserves to be read by both kids and grown-ups.

Together with traveling salesman Simon, Nicola and her devil companion spend their days moving from city to city, selling unusual wares and camping in the woods along the way. Simon's charge doesn't always know how to behave, and he tries to be kind and patient but doesn't know a lot about kids. The demon world is populated with monsters who have their own cultures, beliefs, and superstitions, just like humans. Demon civilization has a lot of parallels to human society, but everything is inverted just enough that Nicola fumbles around trying to fit in. Humans aren't allowed in the demon world, but, as we gradually learn, Nicola might not be an average human.

While younger readers will latch onto the goofy, mischievous protagonist, older readers will be impressed by the imaginative, densely populated demon world. From dusty hotels to busy pubs, every panel is crammed with detail. The fairy-tale simplicity of the story is complemented by the art, reminiscent of illustrations in vintage storybooks. Heavy on ink and scratchy hard lines, *Nicola* balances manga style with influences from classical illustrators without having to make concessions in either direction. Readers used to zipping through manga would do well to slow down and savor the carefully crafted visual atmosphere.



PERSONA 5 © 2017 Hisato MURASAKI/SHOGAKUKAN © ATLUS © SEGA All rights reserved.

The idea of subverting themes and expectations in children's stories is far from new, but when it's done right, the result is a story that is both wondrous and thoughtful. The demon world seems unpleasant, but that's only from a human perspective, and the point of the manga is to see things through another set of eyes. *Nicola* is heartfelt and lively, and its messages are simple and powerful without falling into the trap of heavy-handed moralizing. **Recommended.** (David Estrella)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media

STORY AND ART
Hisato Murasaki

ORIGINAL CONCEPT
Attilus

RATING
T+

Persona 5

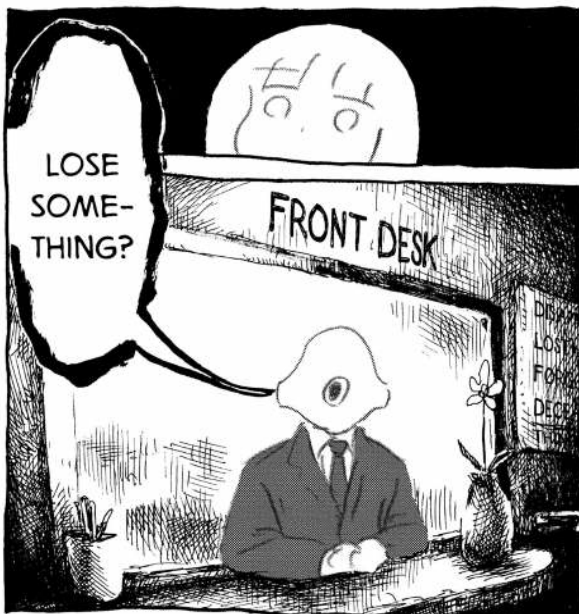
Many gamers have bitter memories of the wait for *Persona 5*, which suffered years of delays. Eventually released to critical acclaim and success, *P5* has since inspired all manner of tie-ins, including spin-off rhythm games, a character cameo in Nintendo's *Smash Bros.* series, and of course, an anime series and a manga adaptation. The anime wrapped up earlier this year in Japan, and now, squeezed in

right before the arrival of the game's expanded re-release *Persona 5 Royal*, the manga is out in English from Viz Media.

For the most part, the *P5* manga is a straight adaptation of the original game's storyline. The biggest change is that the main character speaks. Typically, every *Persona* protagonist is silent with the exception of the occasional dialogue prompt, but the manga introduces Akira Kurusu, who thinks for himself and makes the middle-of-the-road decisions cautious gamers might choose early on. Volume 1 begins much like the game: Akira, a teenager on probation after a scuffle with a violent drunk, moves into a new neighborhood, glumly resigned to his criminal record following him everywhere. In the middle of the Shibuya crossing, he glimpses the power of "Persona," a manifestation of his psyche that grants him supernatural abilities.

It's hard for a manga to get across the best qualities of the *Persona* games. While the story sequences can be compressed into a straightforward narrative, the series is less about plot than exploring the setting. There's nothing quite like getting lost in *P5*'s detailed depiction of Tokyo, especially with the incredible soundtrack to set the mood. Unfortunately, the manga doesn't go out of its way to place readers in this world. The closest it gets to capturing the lived-in spirit of the game is when Akira arrives at LeBlanc, the café owned by his guardian, and even then we only stay for a few pages before heading back out into sparsely drawn streets and classrooms.

The *Persona 5* manga might be useful to audiences intrigued by the premise but unwilling to invest the hundreds of hours necessary to complete the game. Artist Hisato Murasaki, new to the

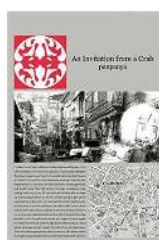


© panpanya

Persona franchise, seems to have been instructed to follow the story beat for beat. Compared to the previous *Persona* manga, published by Udon Entertainment, Viz's acquisition lacks the flourishes that sell the style of the original property. At the rate the manga moves, coupled with Viz's slow release schedule for the series, it may be a couple of years before the Phantom Thieves hit their stride. (David Estrella)

Invitation from a Crab

Denpa, the newest manga publisher in town, has already made its mark with a unique collection of titles that are hard to pigeonhole by genre. *Invitation from a Crab*, by indie cartoonist panpanya, blurs the line between mainstream manga and nontraditional comic publishing.



PUBLISHER
Denpa

STORY AND ART
panpanya

RATING
Unrated/T

In each of the short vignettes, an unnamed girl has some sort of unnatural encounter, whether chasing the titular crab through the streets, generating electricity by slicing coconuts, receiving toys that get bigger and more complex as she grows up, or trying to get her physical body back after she left it on a train. All of the stories intersect with the spiritual and the folkloric; Japanese yokai and an unusual spirit world make regular appearances.

Most of the stories are self-contained and non-linear, interspersed with the author's short essays

on random topics such as how every object has some sort of detail, or how the eyeball processes light. What they have in common is a surreal mix of whimsy, lingering dread, and elements of the supernatural. The writing is quiet with a dash of dry humor; while not laugh-out-loud funny, it's often amusing and charming.

The manga's greatest strength is its shifting watercolor-y art. Sometimes the illustrations are clear, detailed, and naturalistic, akin to the haunting work of classic manga artists like Shigeru Mizuki. At other times, everything looks like a blatant cartoon, and the protagonist herself is a loose pencil sketch. The changing styles are perfect for communicating the surreal mood of the stories.

Are these vignettes folk tales? Daydreams, perhaps? Or are we getting some kind of philosophical lecture on the natures of man and animal? It's hard to say. Although the top-notch illustrations and wry dialogue don't always align to tell a satisfying story, they do create beautiful, thought-provoking experiences. Accept that crab's invitation if you want the kind of journey other manga don't offer. (Michael Goldstein)



PUBLISHER

Viz Media

STORY

Junji Ito & Osamu Dazai

ART

Junji Ito

RATING

18+

No Longer Human

To adapt Japan's second best-selling novel into an equally chilling graphic novel, it's hard to think of a better artist than horror master Junji Ito to do it justice.

Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* is a disturbing, semi-autobiographical portrait of an artist as he reflects on his inability to make human connections or feel fully human himself. It's a harrowing portrait of a troubled person who spends his life hiding behind a mask.

The story begins in Oba's childhood, where he learns to put a smile on his face to cover the deadness inside. He goes through several life-changing events, including abuse at the hands of a female servant and the gruesome suicide of his only friend. He discovers he's good at painting and creates a grotesque portrait of himself, which Junji Ito illustrates in his inimitable eerie style. As Oba grows up, he becomes a bit of a womanizer and gets addicted to drinking and smoking. He and one of his lovers make a suicide pact, with shocking results. Although Oba's story isn't horror in the usual sense, it's disturbing and harrowing, and Ito imbues it with a feeling of straight-up horror manga.

This is a bleak tale without a happy ending, but it's mesmerizing to watch Oba as he continually digs himself deeper into a hole. Ito puts his talent for terrifying imagery into depicting abuse, inner turmoil, and stomach-churning scenes drawn in excruciating detail. Readers who are already familiar with the novel will find new things to discover in this adaptation.

NINGEN SHIKKAKU © 2017 Junji ITO/SHOGAKUKAN



As with his earlier adaptation of *Frankenstein*, Ito displays a gift for adapting a written story to the comics form. *No Longer Human* isn't an uplifting or positive story in any way, but Ito is always able to take the grotesque and make it seem quietly, weirdly beautiful. More than just an adaptation, *No Longer Human* could very well be one of Ito's best works, period. (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER

Seven Seas

STORY AND ART

Kei Hamuro

RATING

T

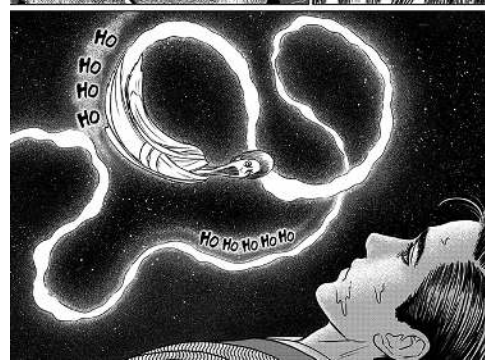
Our Wonderful Days

This sweet yuri slice-of-life story follows Koharu Hanamura as she starts high school and reconnects with her childhood friend, Mafuyu Shirotsuki. Mafuyu moved away to Tokyo when they were both young, and when she moves back Koharu marvels over how pretty she's become. They slowly start spending more time together and with the rest of Koharu's circle of friends.

The plot doesn't get much more complicated than that. Unlike many yuri romances, there's no drama or will-they-or-won't-they tension, just love, humor, and charming characters. It's almost like *Lucky Star* with a little more romance. That said, it's not just a straightforward tale of a couple coming together, as feelings develop between other girls in the group as well.

Kei Hamuro's art is adorable, bringing out each character's unique personality. Mafuyu is the opposite of Koharu in both looks and attitude. They complement each other perfectly, and it's fun to see their personalities come out in the artwork. The supporting characters are equally well developed and well drawn.

Our Wonderful Days is breezy, relaxing reading.



It's comfort food. It's not for readers looking for tightly plotted drama or intense romance, but for anyone who just wants to watch young women flirting, crushing, and enjoying life together, it's one of the most enjoyable slice-of-life yuri manga available. (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER

Viz

STORY AND ART

Tasuku Kurasuma

RATING

T+

No Guns Life

In a cyberpunk future—which in 2019 is best explained as “socioeconomically just like today, but there are full-body cyborgs”—controlled by the Berühren Corporation, the Extended are people who have undergone body augmentation to become living weapons. But the war in which they fought is long over, and as the Extended rejoice society they run into

problems with non-augmented folk. Veteran and private consultant Juzo “The Resolver” Inui is rather Over-Extended: in addition to being implanted with various bodily firearms, his head is a giant pistol revolver. A literal hired gun and a hardboiled, Raymond Chandler-inspired pulp hero, Inui says things like, “Booze and women make a man crazy,” while lamenting that the design of his gun head is such that it requires someone else to pull his trigger. Were Golgo 13 around, I'm sure he'd do so lovingly and softly if asked.

When a renegade Extended on the run leaves a young child in Inui's care, “The Resolver” finds himself entangled with the Security Bureau, femmes fatale, underworld mechanics, mega-corporation executives, organized crime bosses, and all the other mainstays one might expect from a neo-noir sci-fi crime story in which a PI gets in way over his head. Not only does the boy, Tetsuro,

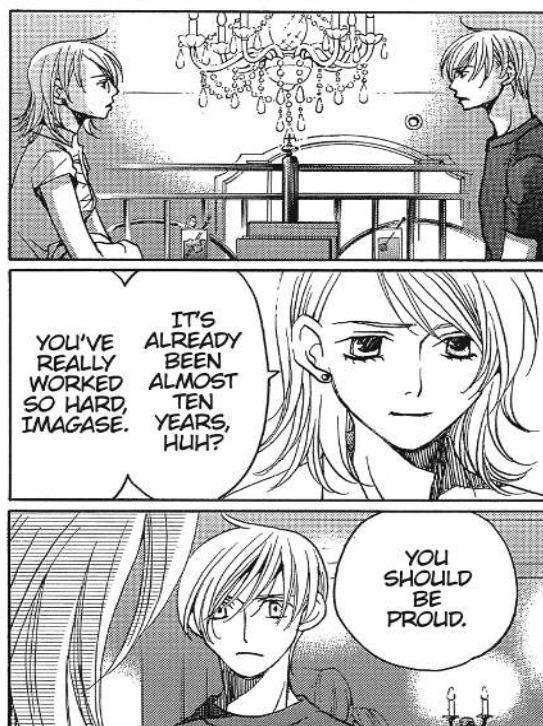


possess unique power as a result of being a human test subject, he's also the son of the CEO of Berühren. GEE, THANKS, DAD.

So begins the still-ongoing yarn by Tasuku Karasuma in all of its pure seinen glory. *Shonen Jump* is nice, but it's good to see the Viz Signature line awoken from near-dormancy to release this as well as several other noteworthy titles. By the time you read this, the anime adaptation of *No Guns Life* from Madhouse will be out in English-language release, no doubt a critical factor in Viz's decision to publish the first-rate manga that inspired it. **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)

Overlord la Carte

This anthology of short stories is 100% for fans of the *Overlord* light novels and anime. Anyone looking for an entry to the series will need to look elsewhere. It's almost impossible to get through



PUBLISHER
Yen Press
ORIGINAL STORY
Kugane Maruyama
ART
Various Artists
RATING
OT

world loves Ainz. He is their can-do-no-wrong fearless leader. Many of the short stories revolve around two of the female characters, Shalltear and Albedo, who are fighting for the chance to

have Ainz's baby. Unfortunately, in this world Ainz is a skeleton and has no genitals, but the NPCs' faith in their Overlord cannot be shaken.

All of the artists are excellent and obviously enjoyed getting to play in the *Overlord* world. Some of the shorts suffer from cramped panels, but that's understandable given the space constraints of trying to tell a story in under 10 pages. It's fun to see each artist's take on the characters. The styles range from the simple but charming "Master's First Time" by Kuko Okano to the heavily detailed and shaded "The Pandora Revolution" by Akudo Gazari. There's very little to warrant the Older Teen rating. There's no nudity and the adult content is mostly limited to jokes about Shalltear stuffing her bra and nudge-nudge allusions to the fact that it's hard to procreate as a skeleton. But the book is fine for *Overlord* fans from tween on up. (Che Gilson)



The Cornered Mouse Dreams of Cheese

What happens when the private investigator you hire to look into your partner's infidelity makes himself part of the love triangle? That's the setup of *The Cornered Mouse Dreams of Cheese*. In this josei-oriented yaoi manga, things are never exactly what they seem.

Kyouichi is a married office worker who regularly indulges in extramarital affairs. When his wife Chikako gets fed up with his behavior, she hires his old college classmate Imagase, a private investigator, to find proof of Kyouichi's infidelity. Imagase collects plenty of evidence, but then he goes to Kyouichi with a proposition: unfettered access to Kyouichi's body, or he'll spill the beans to Chikako.

It's not a savory situation, and neither of the leads is an especially good person. Imagase is an obsessive creep blackmailing Kyouichi for sex, and Kyouichi is willing to do anything to keep his serial cheating secret. As such, it's hard to root for either one of them, but their interpersonal drama develops into a satisfying potboiler. The writing and characterization are strong enough to help sell the skeezy plot. The female characters are developed enough to be more than just an annoyance or a hurdle to the men's romance, as happens in many yaoi. The manga seems to be aware that Kyouichi and Imagase probably shouldn't be together in the first place.

If you're looking for a happy ending, this is the wrong yaoi manga for you. But if you're less interested in gushy romance than in a drama-ridden relationship where everything is as messy as possible, you'll find it in *The Cornered Mouse Dreams of Cheese*. Not everyone gets, or deserves, lasting love. But fleeting happiness is sometimes worth the pain. (Brittany Vincent)



Food Wars!: The Third Plate kicks it up a notch.

DIG IN

By Daryl Surat

Like the kitchen, *Shonen Jump* is a battlefield. Series start and get canceled almost immediately if they fail to catch on, which is why *Jump* action titles traditionally start by introducing the main characters first before later making up an overarching storyline and greatly expanded supporting cast. Then, should a series REALLY hit it off they introduce the true primary antagonist for whom all others seen to date were mere child's play. Despite focusing on combative choice culinary concoctions causing curvaceous cuties' clothing combustion, *Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma* follows this same narrative progression, and so the third anime season known as *The Third Plate* marks the point where things really start to heat up.

It's not too hard to get brought up to speed, but just to recap: teenage working-class, small-town diner cook Soma Yukihira is a freshman transfer student to the prestigious culinary institute, Totsuki Academy. (Note that there are slight differences between the Sentai Filmworks anime translation and Viz's manga release, and while I primarily read the manga, I'll try to remember to use the anime phrasings). At Totsuki, students may issue a cooking duel challenge—aka a "shokugeki"—to others in which something is wagered based on who can create the better dish, as judged by an impartial team of three. Really, though, the true measure of delicious food is whether or not a single bite causes your clothes to just EXPLODE off your body, typically with some sort of accompanying wacky gag (a critical component to the series' popularity, since the entire cast is absurdly attractive!). At first, this is played as a mental thing, but in true *Jump* escalation of stakes, by the end people are actually getting disrobed thanks to the sheer deliciousness of food.





As *The Third Plate* kicks off, Soma and his fellow classmates residing in the Polar Star dormitory where all the school misfits reside are finally introduced to all of the 10 highest ranking students: a council known as the Elite Ten who have each amassed substantial materials and resources, with power to guide the school curriculum. Although most of their cooking specialties remain unrevealed at first—designing the character visually and then figuring out what they actually can do afterward is the *Shonen Jump* way!—the eighth ranking member, Sichuan Chinese food specialist Terunori Kuga, issues a challenge to Soma: surpass him in sales at the upcoming five-day Moon Festival and he'll accept a future shokugeki challenge where he'll wager his Elite Ten seat! Just like everything in *Food Wars!*, the Moon Festival is an ordinary thing

taken to extremes. A massive Japanese school festival event where half a million people show up to sample all manners of exotic cuisine, it's one of my favorite arcs since you get to not only see most of the rather extensive cast introduced thus far showing off their stuff, but it's not a foregone victory for Soma, who spends more time on the ropes before turning the tables through a combination of (what else?) friendship, hard work, and learning through repeated failure.

The Moon Festival is also the final arc before the series introduces its ultimate villain ... or at least the one that was originally intended to be this (see sidebar). Azami Nakiri is the father of the 10th ranking member of the Elite Ten: the haughtily upper class yet sheltered Erina Nakiri, who possesses an ultra-attuned Daredevil-esque sense of taste known as "God's Tongue" which

lets her assess every ingredient and preparation aspect of a dish upon tasting it. For the sake of cultivating Erina's ability as a child, Azami subjected her to psychological abuse and brainwashing that is not so easily shaken off. I'm putting that lightly: Azami is easily among the upper echelons of "terrible anime parents," right alongside Yujiro Hanma from *Baki*. Up to this point, even the antagonists in *Food Wars!* have been lovable goofs, subject to comedically exaggerated reactions or cutesy asides after initially imposing debuts. But there's nothing funny about Erina's dad. No jokes to lighten the mood or quirky personality traits that you can't help but find endearing. Just antiseptic coldness from sullen black eyes. That's what makes him such an effective villain which, in this context, can't be surpassed.

Having convinced a majority of the Elite Ten into ceding control of Totsuki Academy to him, the now Dean Azami Nakiri institutes a new curriculum in which experimentation and self-expression are outlawed in favor of "just follow this exact recipe and preparation method." That may be reassuring to the majority of the school's denizens who no longer need live in constant fear of expulsion, but it also means that all of the research societies and clubs that have given rise to all of the wacky misfit characters we've grown to love are hereby dissolved in favor of one gourmet organization, Central, run by Azami! How can our heroes possibly contend with these ever-changing criteria for expulsion that are continually stacked against them? The answers involve a lot of shifting character allegiances (former allies become foes, and former foes become allies!), training, locomotive training, a flashback revealing what led Soma's father Joichiro to abandon his former status as Totsuki's top student (and Azami's best friend!), and—most of all!—sexy uniform-shredding, sight gag-accompanied delicious meals. Fans call it "Lewd Wars" out of affection, I assure you.

Food Wars!: The Third Plate literally ends in the middle of the final battle for absolute culinary supremacy between the Polar Star rebels and the Elite Ten, but worry not! The final season, *Food Wars!: The Fourth Plate*, is currently being simulcast on both Crunchyroll and VRV in Japanese with English subtitles. The English dub of the series, which recently began airing on television as part of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block, is also available for streaming courtesy of HiDive and Hulu. Plus, Sentai Filmworks is releasing the series on Blu-ray in both Standard and Premium editions, the latter of which comes with all sorts of physical extras such as booklets, pins, chopsticks, plates, bandanas, an apron (under-clothing optional), and of course scandalous nude art cards of the cast. Dig in!

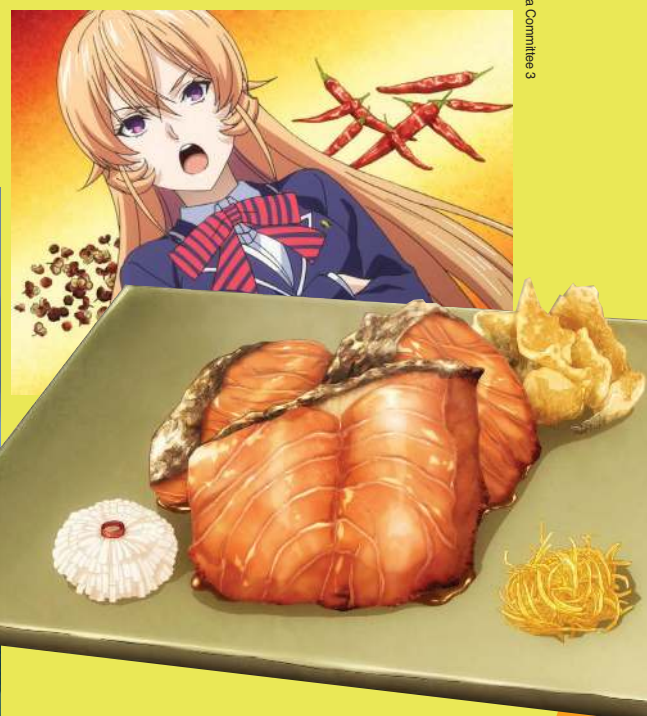
***Food Wars!: The Third Plate* is available from Sentai Filmworks.**

Just a Bit Overcooked

There is a fourth, more unfortunate, part to that *Shonen Jump* narrative progression I alluded to in the beginning, and that's when that ultimate villain is finally defeated ... yet the editors insist the story continue ANYWAY, because they've got a hit on their hands. This has rarely ever worked outside of *Dragon Ball*, and sadly it did not work here either. The battle waged by the end of *Food Wars! The Third Plate*, which reaches its conclusion partway into *The Fourth Plate*, should have by all rights concluded the series. But instead there was a time skip to introduce a new antagonist whom we're somehow supposed to believe is an even BIGGER threat with yet ANOTHER even MORE diabolical cadre of enemy chefs. The cooking gimmicks well had run dry by that point, and so these new characters just use straight-up magical BS rather than the just plausible enough BS that defined the series up to that point. Listen: as *Kamen Rider Kabuto* taught us, "the knife doesn't matter"! Within a year, fan interest in *Food Wars!* dropped and the series was abruptly concluded, with a later epilogue story to wrap things up involving yet another time skip. This narrative device is invariably a letdown, as it removes any ambiguity as to where your favorites end up (or for the relationship-minded, who they now canonically did NOT end up with). At least the flashbacks provided were enjoyable, as they finally explain how Soma got his scar, as well as what happened to his mother.



© Yūto Tsukuda, Shun Saeki Shunishiya, Food Wars! Shokugeki no Soma Committee 3



Up to this point, the antagonists in **FOOD WARS!** have been lovable goofs, subject to comedically exaggerated reactions or cutesy asides after initially imposing debuts. But there's nothing funny about the bad guys in **The Third Plate.**

I've never resented the filler episodes and arcs that pepper Toei Animation's *One Piece* anime quite as much as some. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that unlike so many other shonen tournament fighters, *One Piece*'s fixation on adventure lends itself perfectly to these extended diversions: the space between major story arcs in *One Piece* is measured as much in the miles and miles of sailing between islands as it is in idle days, suggesting that there's plenty of the world Luffy and the other Straw Hat Pirates might have seen between more pressing encounters. Or maybe it has to do with the fact that since getting caught up in the machinations of both the World Government and Four Emperors the Straw Hat Pirates have had little opportunity to leisurely explore their surroundings. The snowballing mythos and heavier stakes introduced by Eiichiro Oda's increased emphasis on plot have gifted *One Piece* with significantly more dimension, but there's something tonally and spatially constraining in this shift that's robbed the series of the grand romanticism that attracted me to it nearly two decades ago. It barely matters that the character designs and the powers in the filler tend to feel like warmed-over Oda ideas, that the stories drag on too long, that the animation and art suffer from a noticeable dip in budget: their continued existence suggests a kind of openness and possibility that's been sadly lacking in the main *One Piece* storyline for some time.

What matters more is that despite the leeway they're granted and that they in turn grant, these side stories remains hobbled by the nature

COME SAIL AWAY

By
Austin
Price





One Piece: Stampede celebrates 20 years of Eiichiro Oda's pirate anime epic.

of canon. No tale they tell can take too many risks for fear of contradicting future developments in Oda's manga, which in turn precludes the possibility of the spontaneous, which in turn robs adventure of its very life blood: the unexpected. The *One Piece* movies, fortunately, make little pretense toward fitting into the larger framework established by Oda and are blessed with sharply focused run times and lavish budgets that have always made them perfect avenues for these kinds of misadventures. Mamoru Hosoda's *Baron Omatsuri* and *the Secret Island* works precisely because it's able to risk stranger stylings and darker head spaces and more abstract threats;

Konosuke Uda's *Dead End Adventure* feels so thrilling because it never feels the need to slow down for even a moment. And for a time, *One Piece: Stampede*—the latest of these movies—feels just as exciting, just as adventurous, at least when director Takashi Otsuka and his staff are willing to bend into all of Oda's most indulgent, celebratory impulses.

Set on the fittingly named Delta Island at the reinstatement of the legendary Pirate Fest, the film initially finds the Straw Hat Pirates shuffling through the streets and alleyways of the new locale where they rub shoulders with a host of characters cribbed from both canon and filler

who've been drawn to the competition by the promise of winning one of Gol D. Roger's most valuable treasures. Before too long the festivities are underway, and the leisurely milling about gives way to a mad cap race that finds Luffy and company scuffling in a battle royale with everyone from the crews of the Supernova to vice admiral Smoker to crowd pleasing dirtbags like Buggy and Foxy as they chase down the promised treasure. It's a spectacle, one every bit as festive as the occasion's name implies it should be, and one that takes time to highlight just how colorful, literally and figuratively, the setting and the characters of *One Piece* really are.

Few artists of any kind can match Oda's talent for creating dozens upon dozens of expressive characters whose outlandish appearances and unconventional abilities exist convincingly in the same world, but here Otsuka and crew do him right through a combination of vivid varied-width lines, free-flowing animation, and a vibrant palette meant to emphasize rather than downplay just how strange Oda's choices for the outfits, postures, sizes, and shapes of his cast are. In an industry where design tendencies trend toward the cool and sleek or the inoffensively bland there is something about Oda's decision to emphasize almost *Looney-Tunes*-style caricature that feels liberating and something about Otsuka's decision to cram all these weirdos into one frame scene after scene that feels like a reproach to less ambitious productions. Even the intrusion of Douglas Bullet, the movie's main villain and a character whose oppressive seriousness feels meant to trample on this buoyant spirit, gives rise to a madcap initial clash between him and the combined forces of the Supernovas that seems intended to suggest not even the interruption of an authoritarian strongman can smother *One Piece*'s irrepressible sense of joy.

Unfortunately, much of this sense is left by the wayside as the focus turns toward Bullet and his sponsor Buena Festa's attempts to instigate an era of endless war. That's not to say the later stages of the story lack their own charms: it's a thrill to see so many disparate cast members' goofy personalities bouncing off one another, and a late exchange between Usopp and Luffy taps well into the themes and earnest sentimentality that give *One Piece* so much emotional heft. It's only that these developments largely trade off the genuine and easy appeal of the opening for overinflated stakes and extended exposition meant to emphasize how serious everything's suddenly become. The change in palette from rich jungle greens and deep sky blues and glowing volcanic reds to drab browns and neon purples rendered in jarring CGI may be motivated by the needs of plot and atmosphere (it may even be intended to highlight by contrast how lively the rest of the cast is), but it doesn't change the fact



©Eiichiro Oda/2019 One Piece production committee

that the extended conflict with Bullet's Awakened form looks boring and takes up most of the movie's run time.

Still worse is that this sense of boredom eventually extends to other elements of the film. The pacing in the middle and late stages is afflicted with a drag that seems to bog down everything from the action to the comedy: there's one comic bit about Buggy running from certain death that's so painfully devoid of rhythm and timing it feels as if it had been left in by accident; Bullet's defeat is built around a very simple plan that takes what feels like ages to actually develop and then implement, which leaves the climax feeling somehow misplaced, as if it simultaneously required a more elaborate plan to emphasize tension but a shorter run time so that much of the movie's vitality wasn't sapped by all the dead-ends and false starts. This might have been alleviated if Bullet and Festa were more lively antagonists, but neither possess the charisma nor menace necessary to merit our extended ire or to make their defeats feel earned; they feel instead like excuses for the action rather than the forces motivating it.

It's fitting then that the movie itself ends up feeling like one big excuse for unmotivated action. Instead of using *Stampede*'s inconsequential status to stretch the limits of what's emotionally acceptable in the *One Piece* universe as Hosoda did or to focus exclusively the kinds of daring-do Uda emphasized, Otsuka seems resigned to his status as the helm of just one more unessential installment in a never-ending franchise. He may have greater resources than his TV-bound contemporaries, and less editorial oversight, but his mindset is every bit as constrained, resulting in a movie that leaves off feeling less like a grand new adventure than a forgettable pit stop.

One Piece: Stampede was produced by Toei Animation to honor the 20th anniversary of the *One Piece* anime, and in commemoration the staff have taken time to dip into the back catalogue of anime-only creations they themselves drummed up to fill out the environs of *Stampede*. Sharp-eyed viewers will spot cameos ranging from Zenny the would-be-pirate to vice admiral Jonathan, lending *Stampede* a sense that for Toei Animation, this movie is as much an excuse to celebrate *One Piece* as it is to celebrate their own contributions to the series' legacy.

Home Video and Digital for *One Piece: Stampede* is available from Funimation.



ONE PIECE: STAMPEDE

is a spectacle, one every bit as festive as the occasion's name implies it should be, and one that takes time to highlight just how colorful, literally and figuratively, the setting and the characters of **ONE PIECE** really are.

OTAKUUSA

MANGA PREVIEWS

We bet you know how this works already, but for those of you in the cheap seats, our manga section is printed in the correct Japanese format, to be read from right to left. Begin on the upper right of each two-page spread, reading each panel right-to-left, from the right page to the left. Click the arrow on the right side to advance to the following pages.



MY FATHER IS A UNICORN

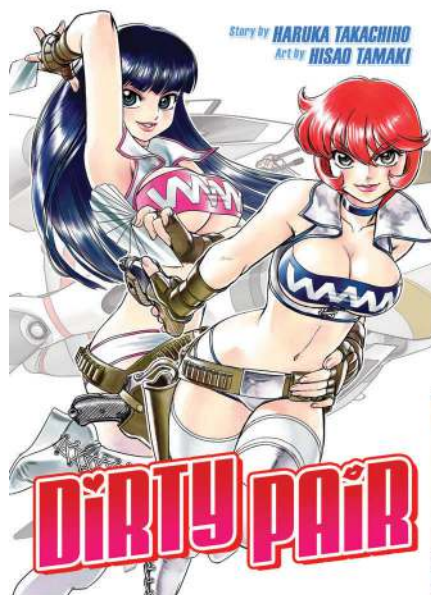
PAGE 39

Story and Art by Monaka Suzuki

Learning to live with a stepfather can be tough—especially if your new dad is a unicorn!

Uno Issei is still in high school when his mother remarries. His mom's new husband, Masaru, is a nice enough guy, he just happens to be a unicorn. Sometimes in the form of a talking horse, sometimes in the form of a beautiful man, Masaru is determined to run the household while his wife is away and win Issei over. For better or worse, now Issei is stuck teaching this unicorn man how to be a good dad in this idiosyncratic comedy about the magic of family.

Available now!



DIRTY PAIR OMNIBUS

PAGE 55

Story and Art by Haruka Takachiho and Hisao Tamaki

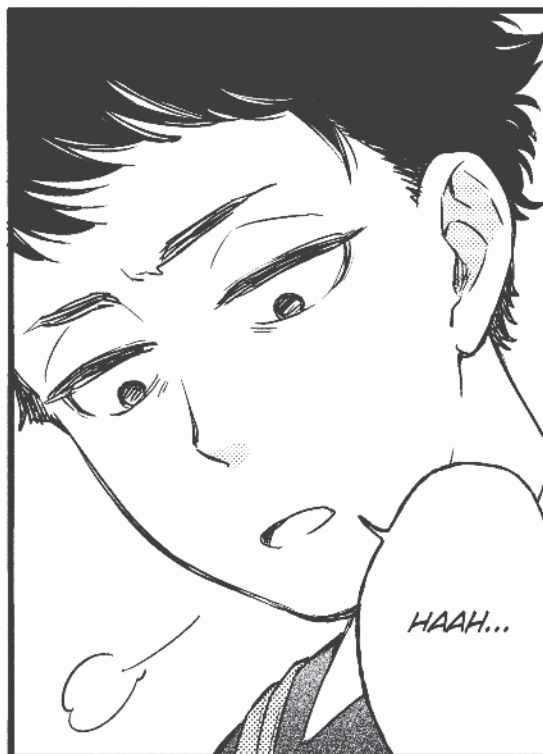
A two-in-one manga omnibus about the classic science fiction characters by Haruka Takachiho and *Star Wars: A New Hope* manga artist Hisao Tamaki!

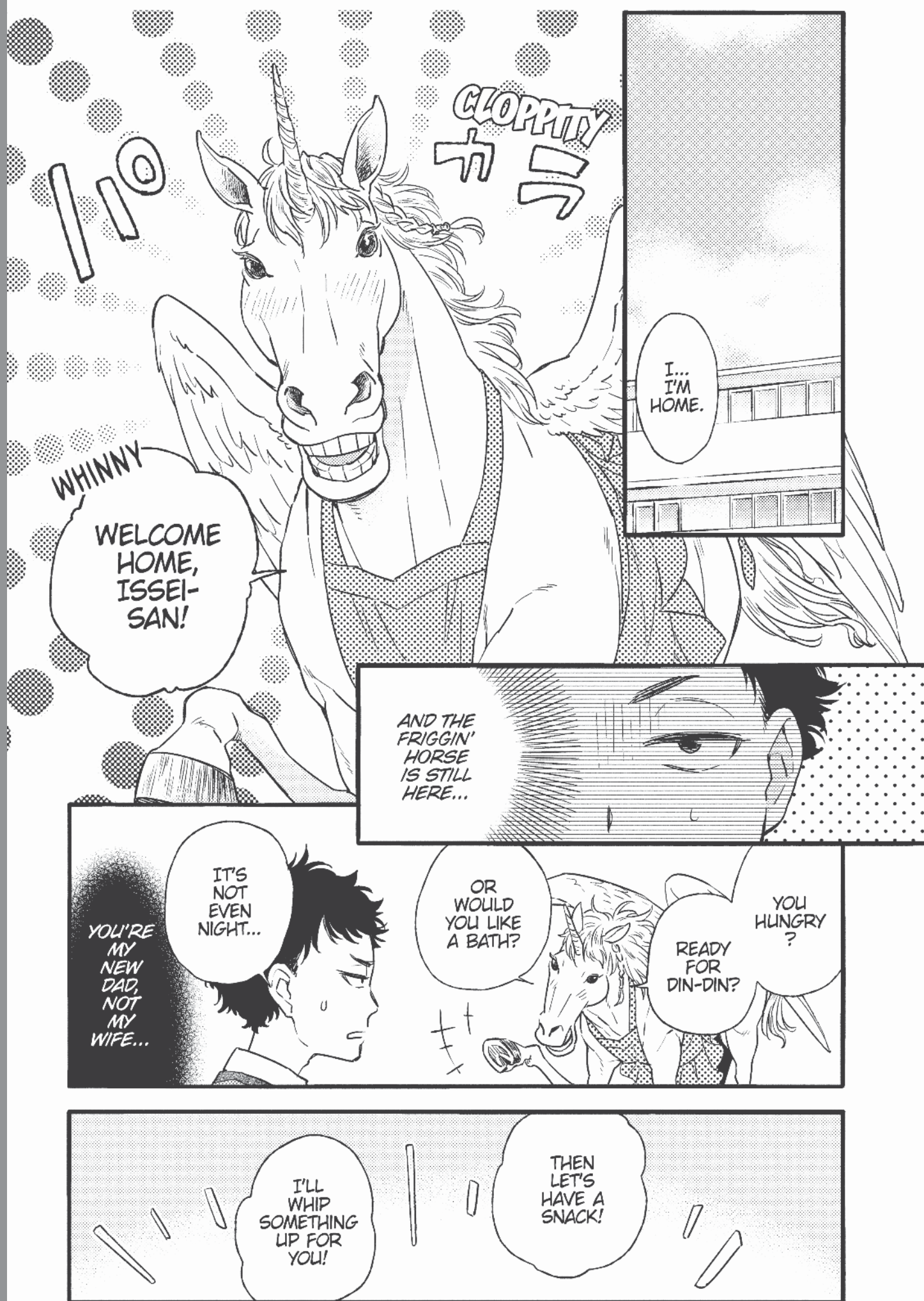
Kei and Yuri, known as the Lovely Angels—or the notorious Dirty Pair, depending on who you ask—work as “trouble consultants” for the galactic Worlds Welfare and Works Association (WWWA). But in their pursuit of space-wide justice, they cause space-wide disaster! The chaotic (and strangely successful) exploits of these interstellar agents have charmed audiences since their debut in 1980. For the first time ever, this manga adventure for the iconic pair—created in Japan as a retelling of the first light novel—will be available in English, contained entirely in one omnibus!

“I’m delighted to see Hisao Tamaki, an almost criminally underrated mangaka, bring his high-energy sauciness to the Lovely Angels’ very earliest escapades.” – Adam Warren (*Dirty Pair, Empowered*)

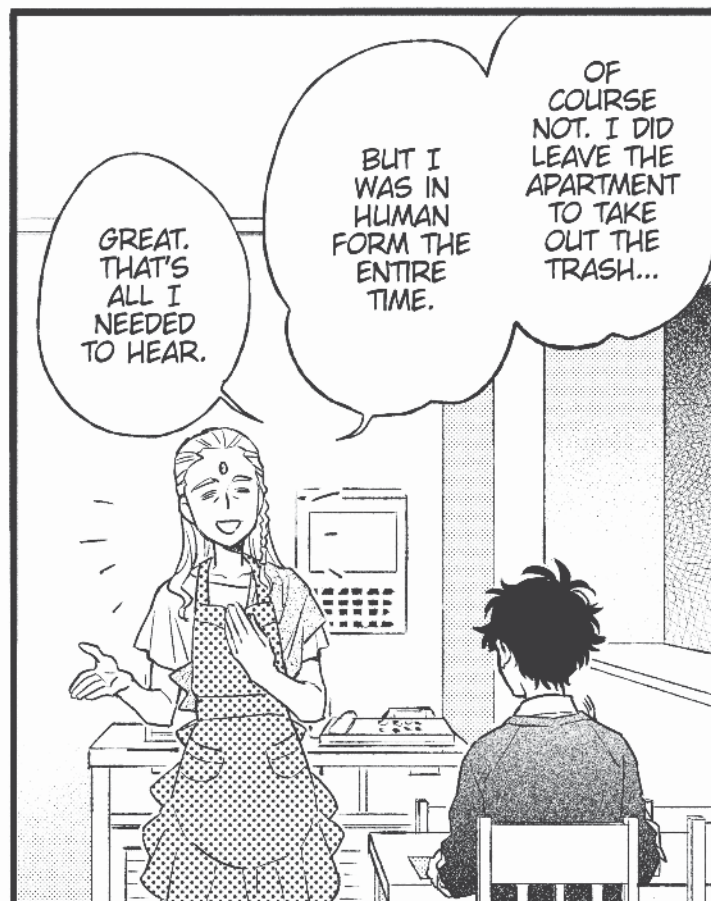
Available now!

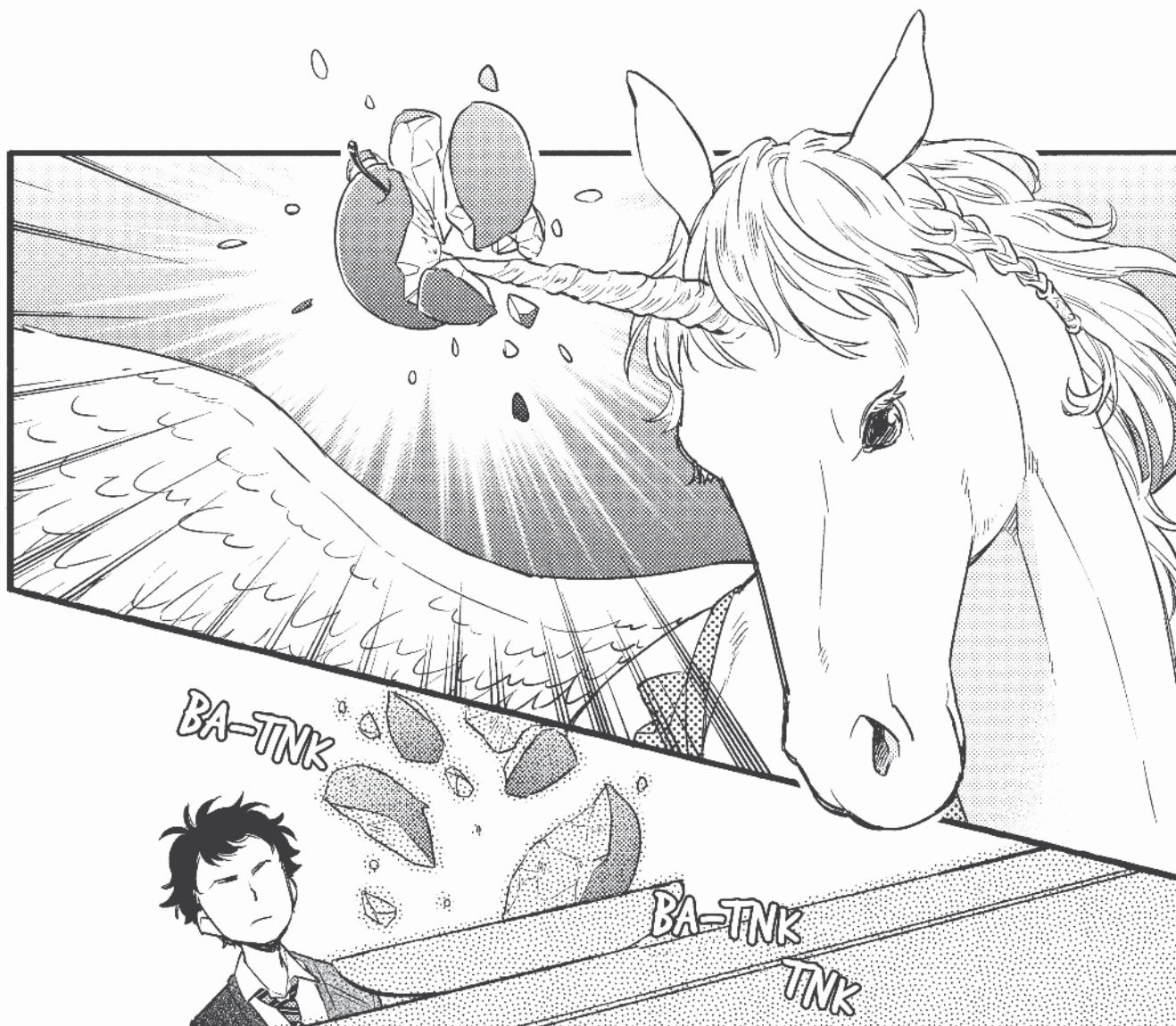
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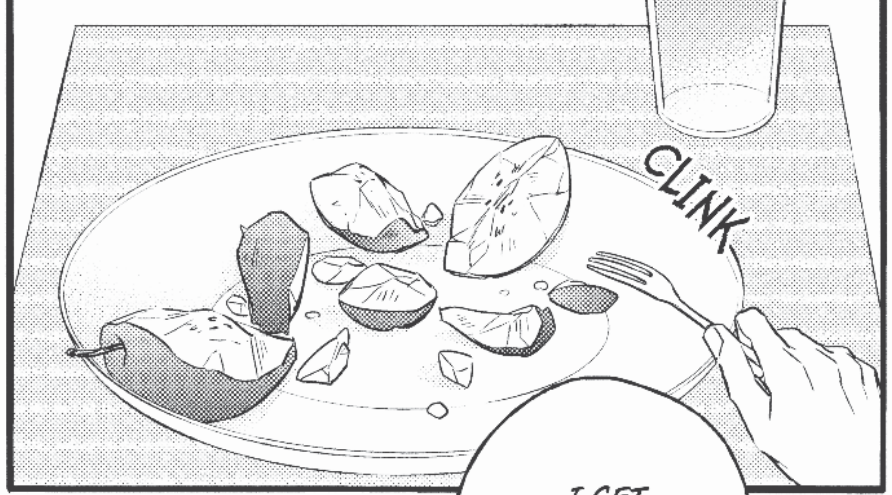


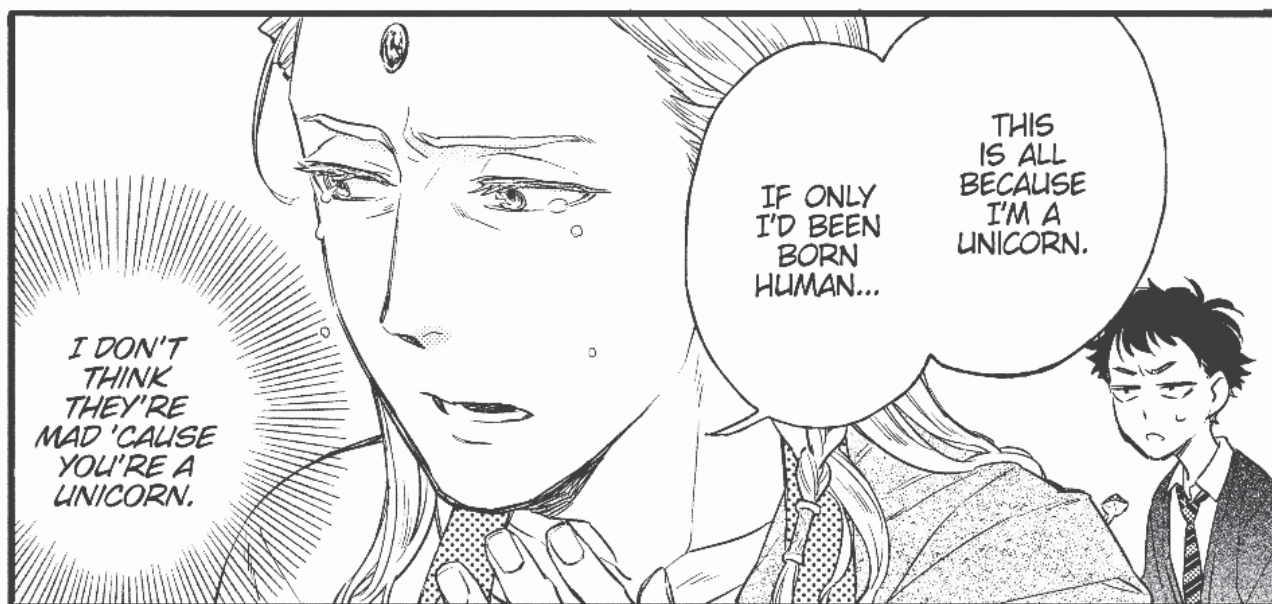
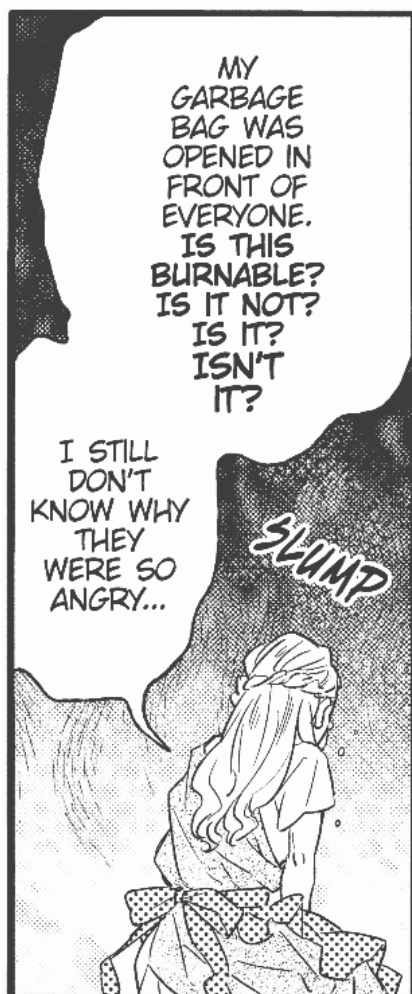


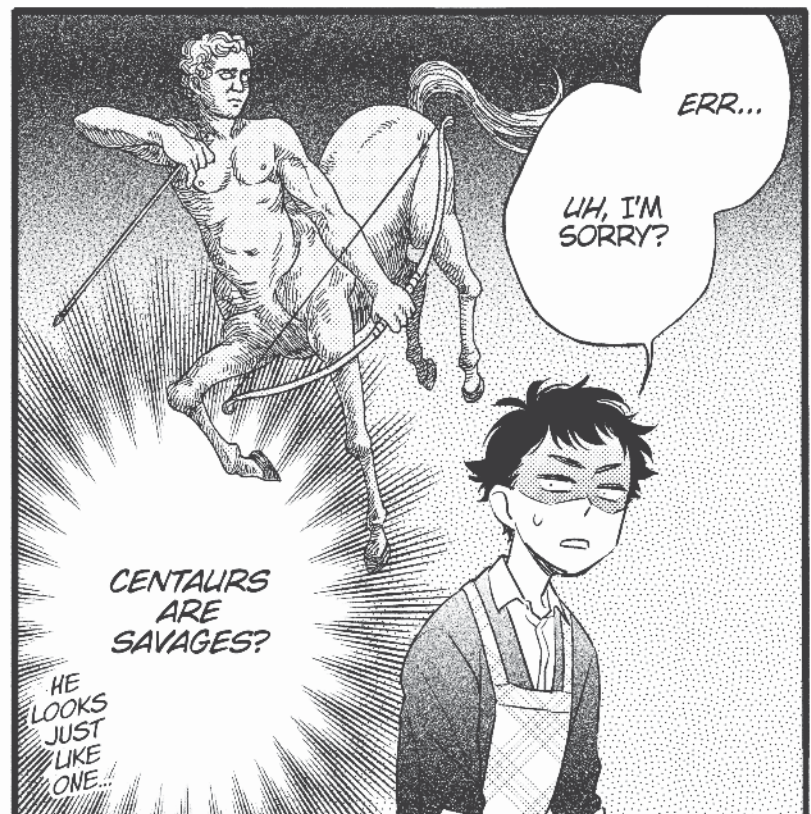
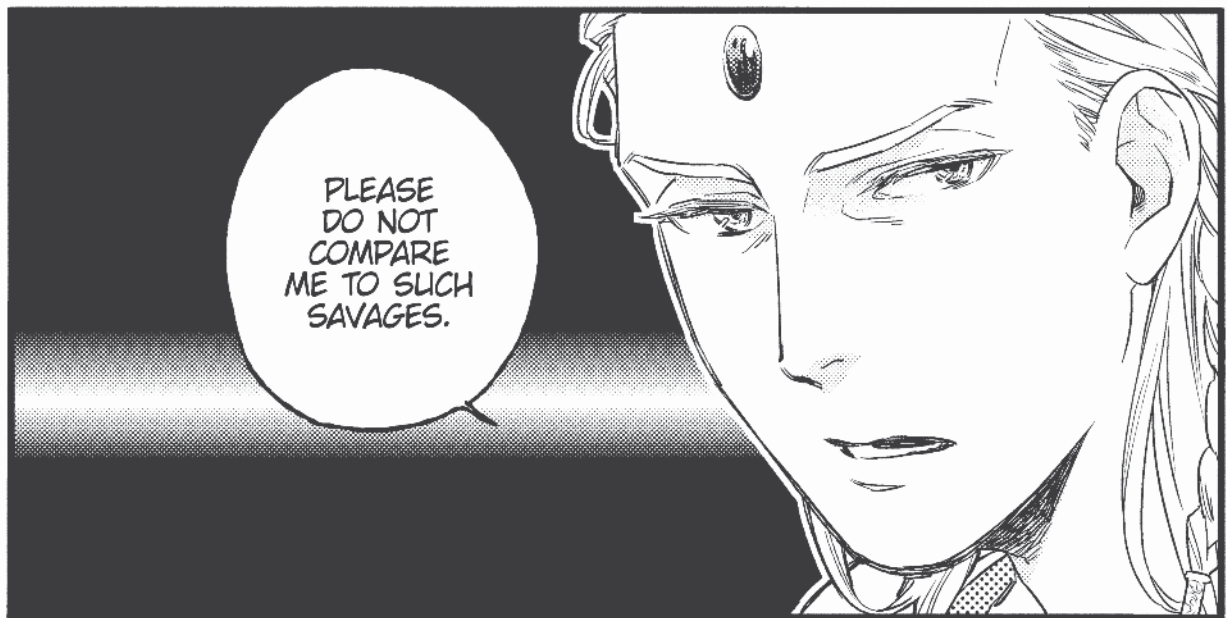
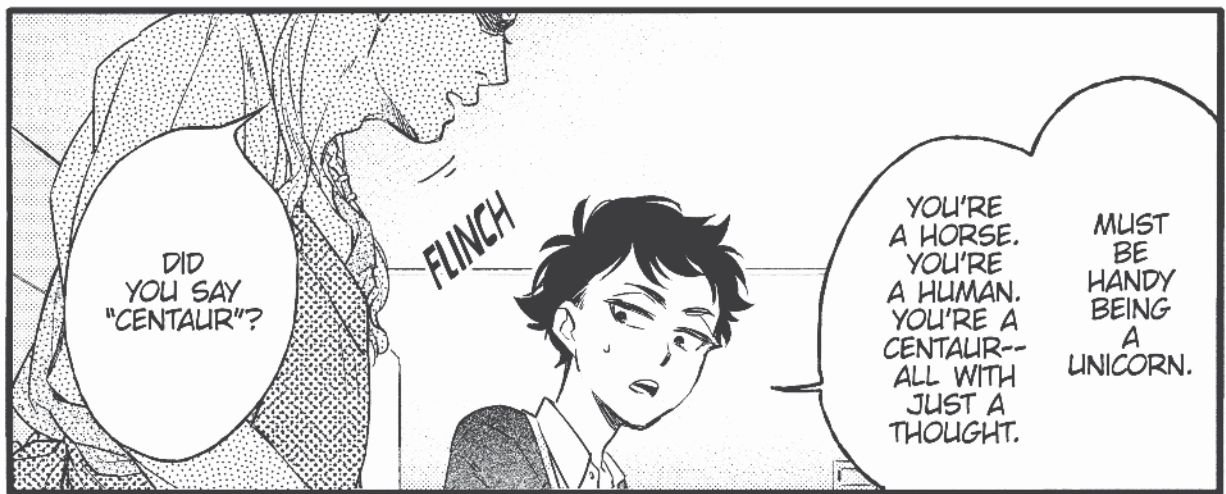


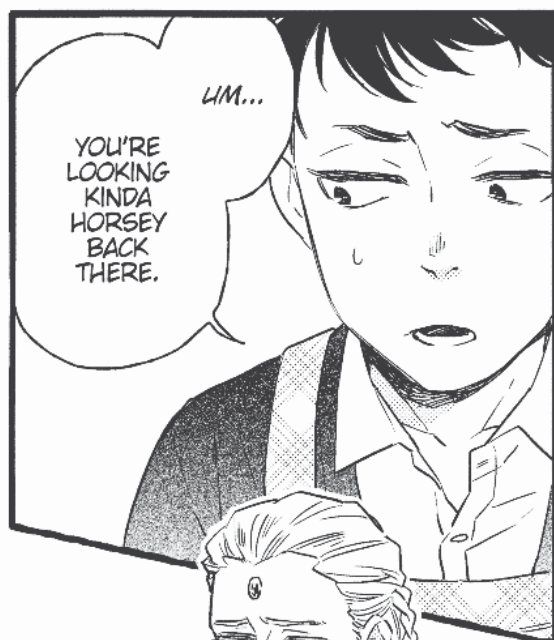
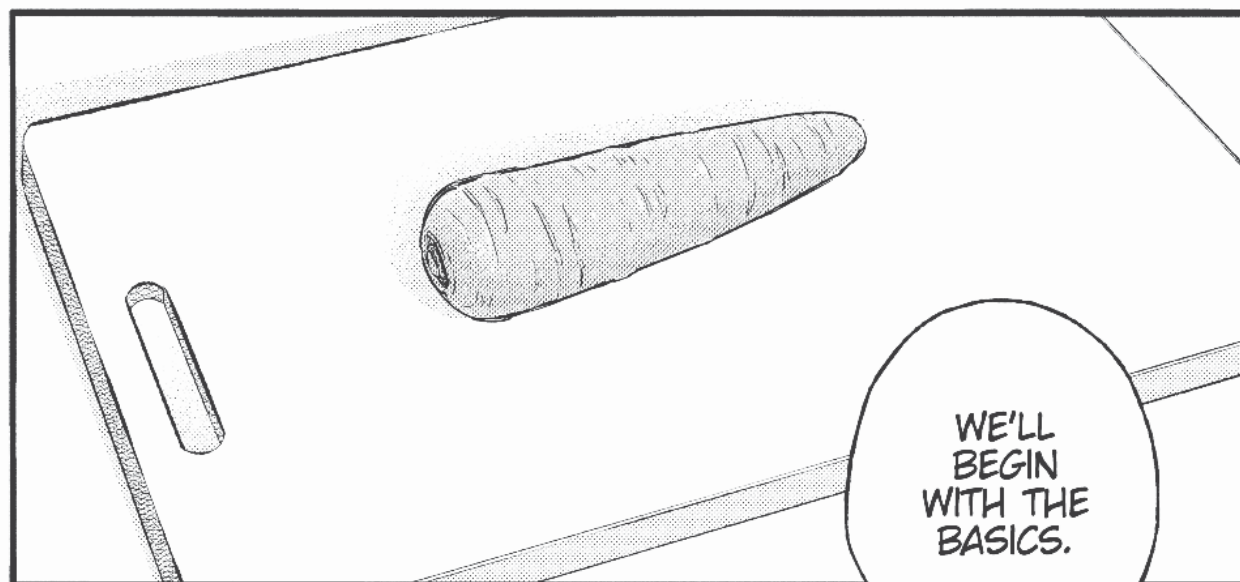


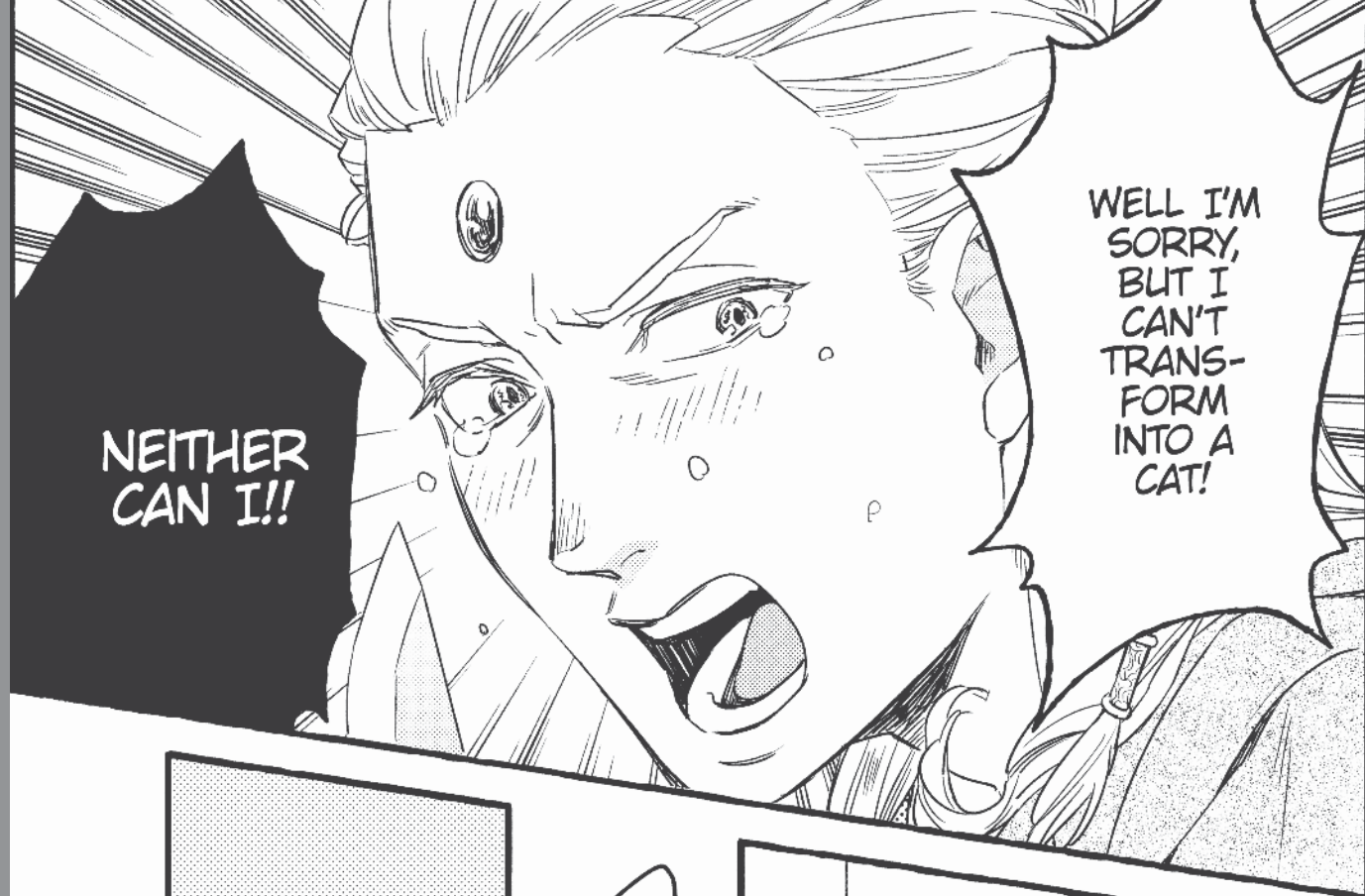






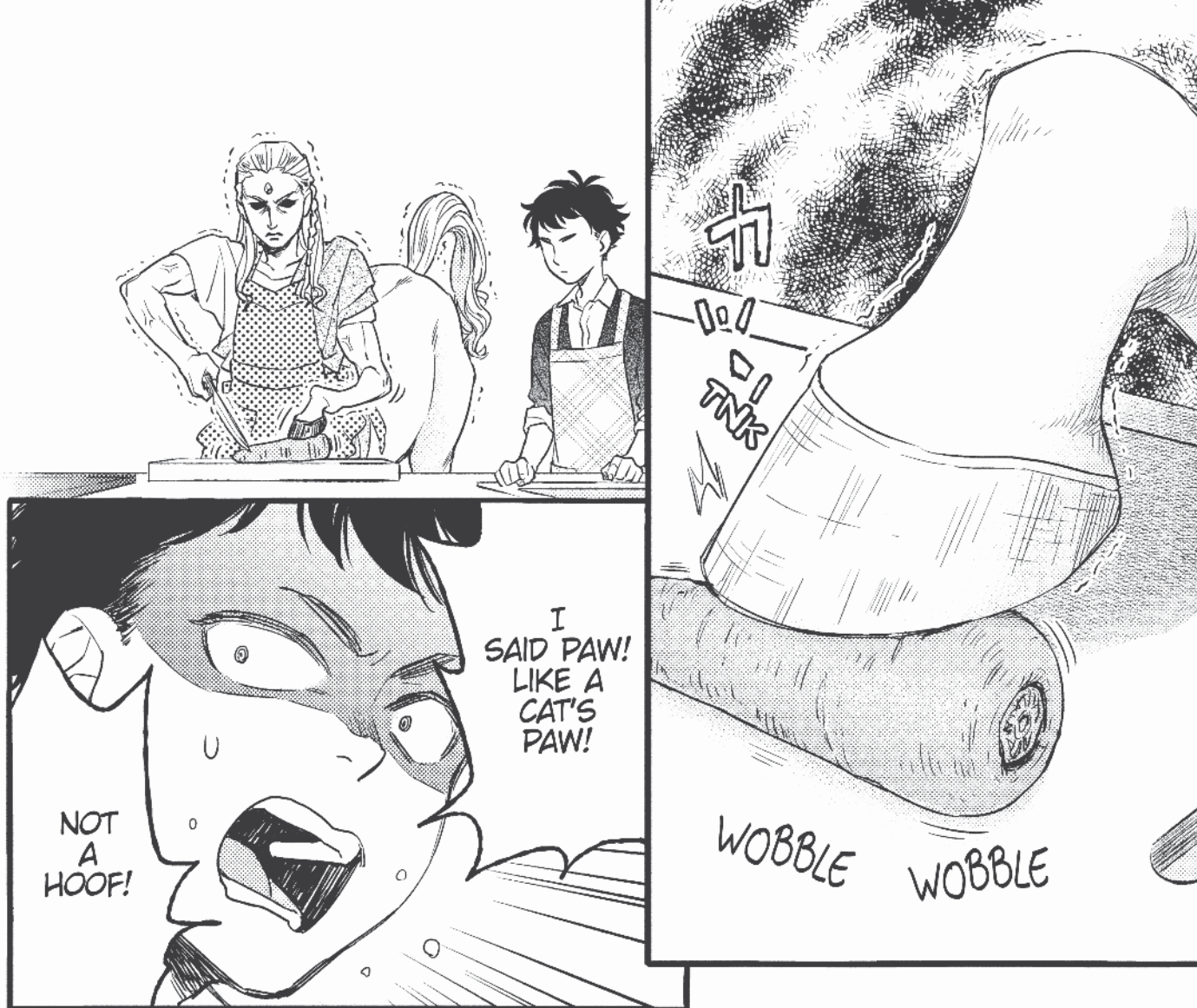


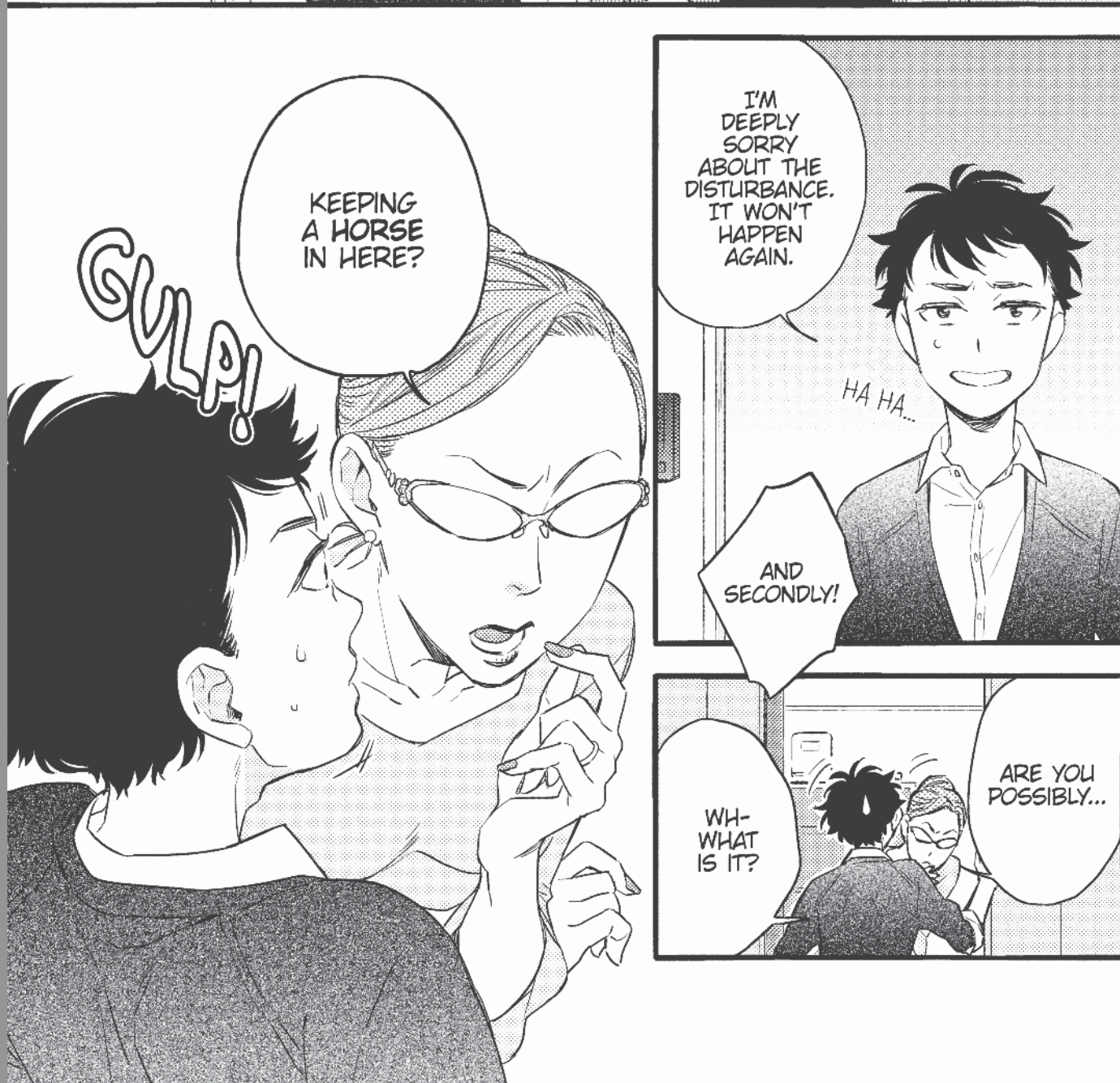


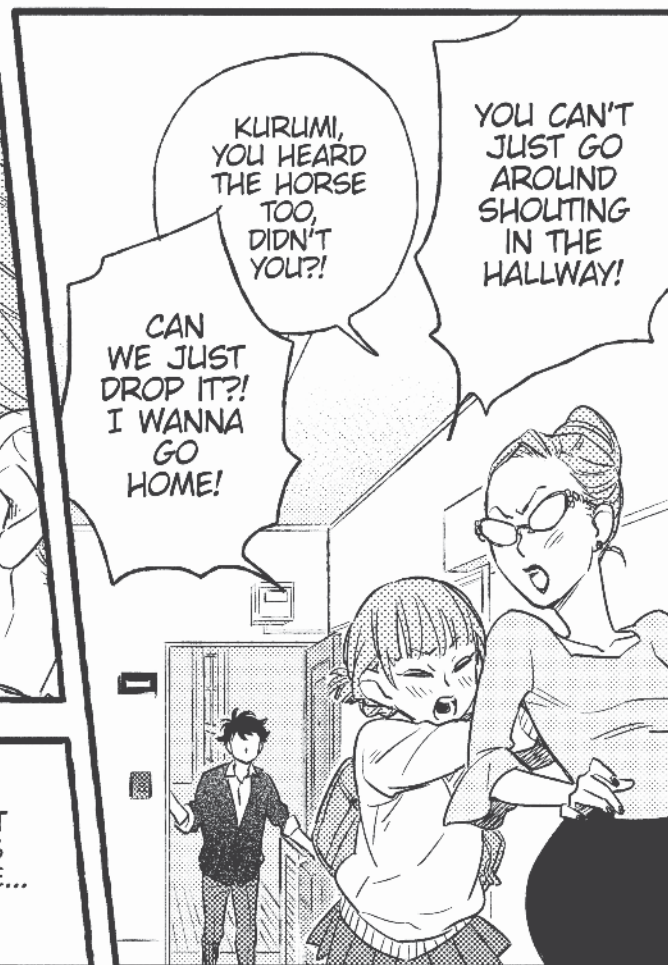


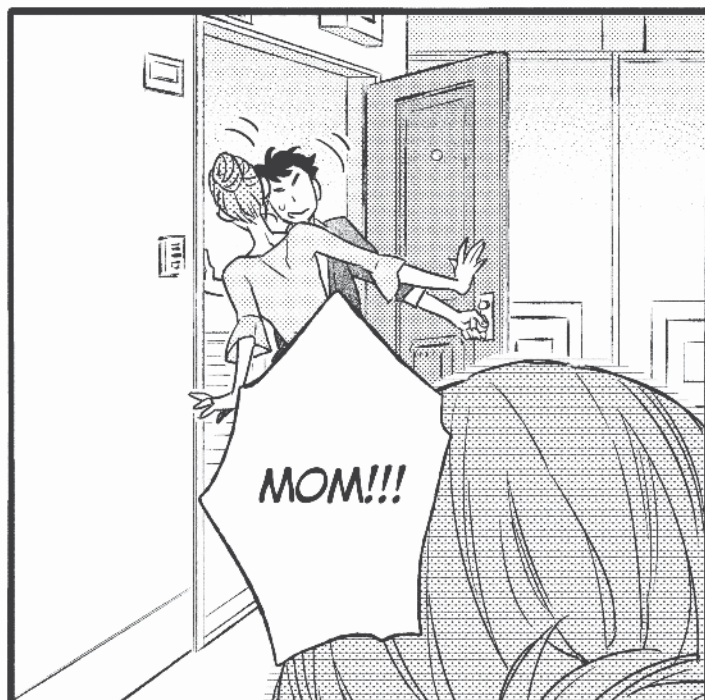
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POON





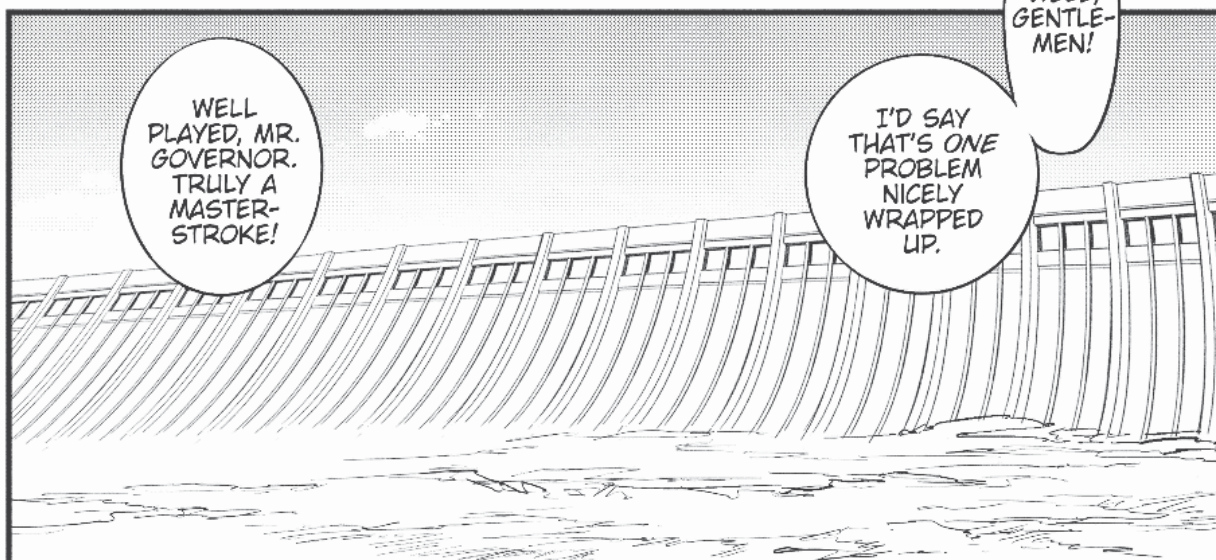
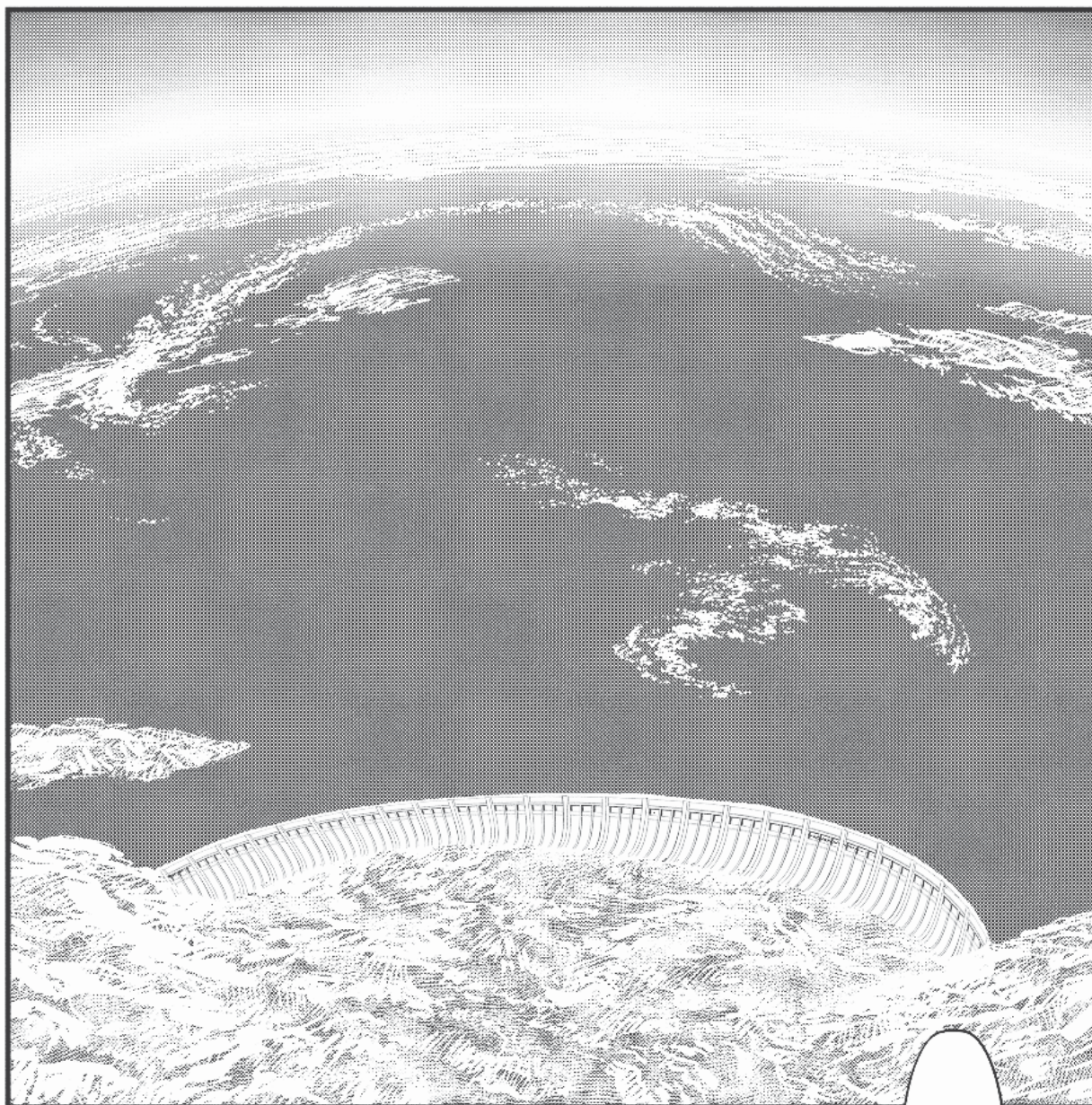






Seven Seas - DIRTY PAIR OMNIBUS

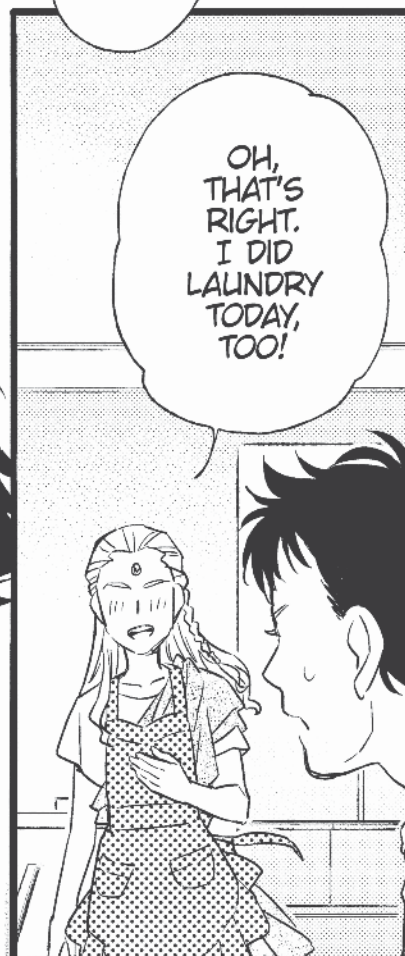
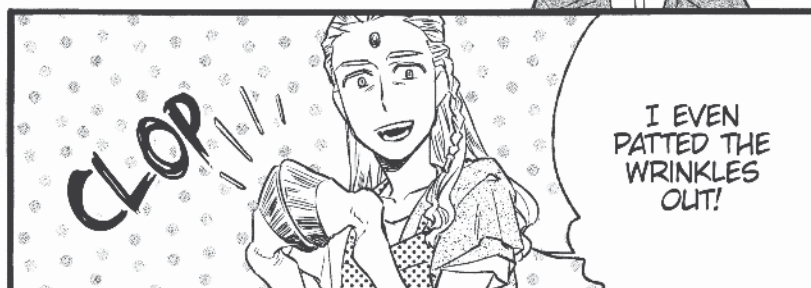
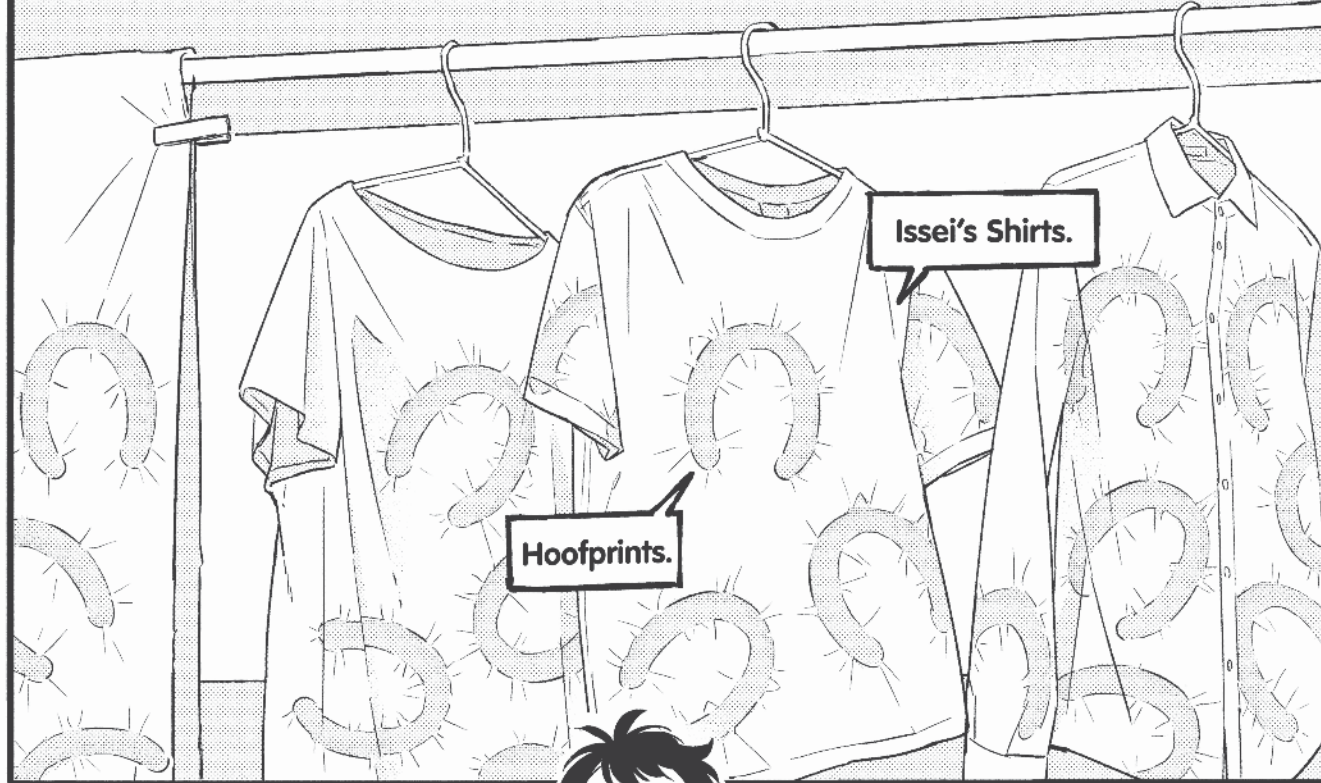
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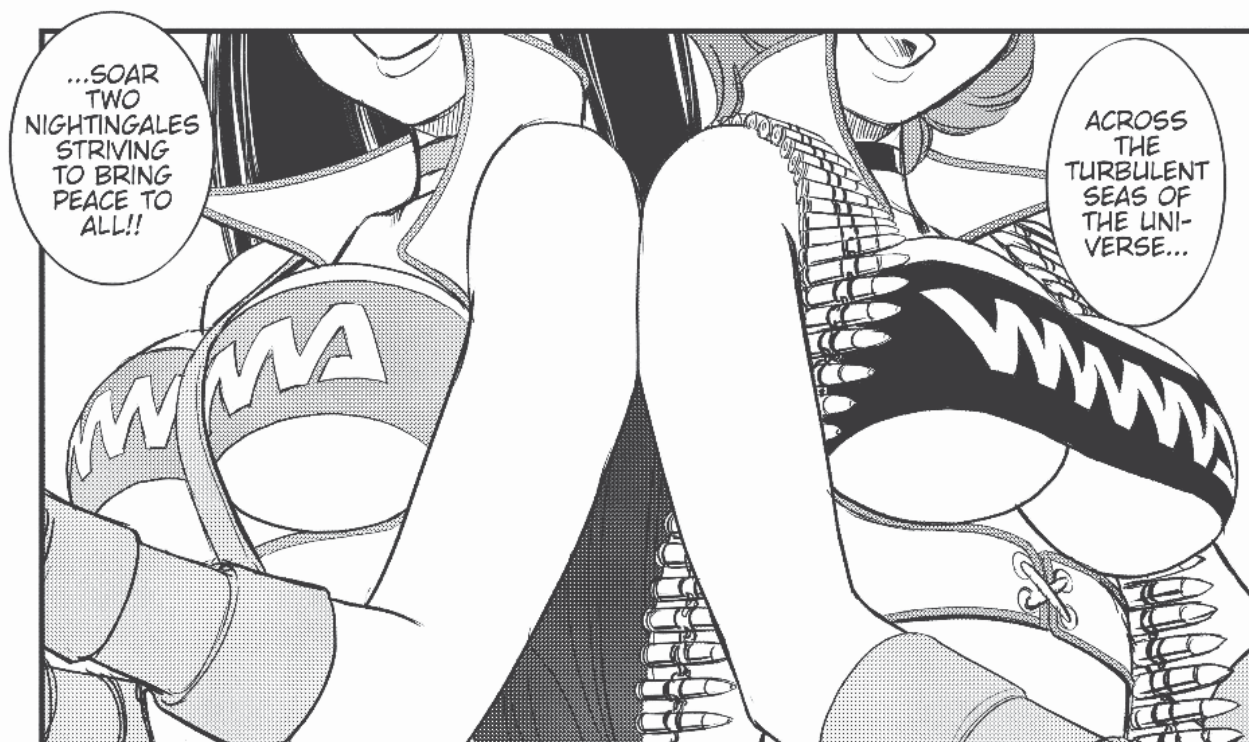
WELL,
GENTLE-
MEN!

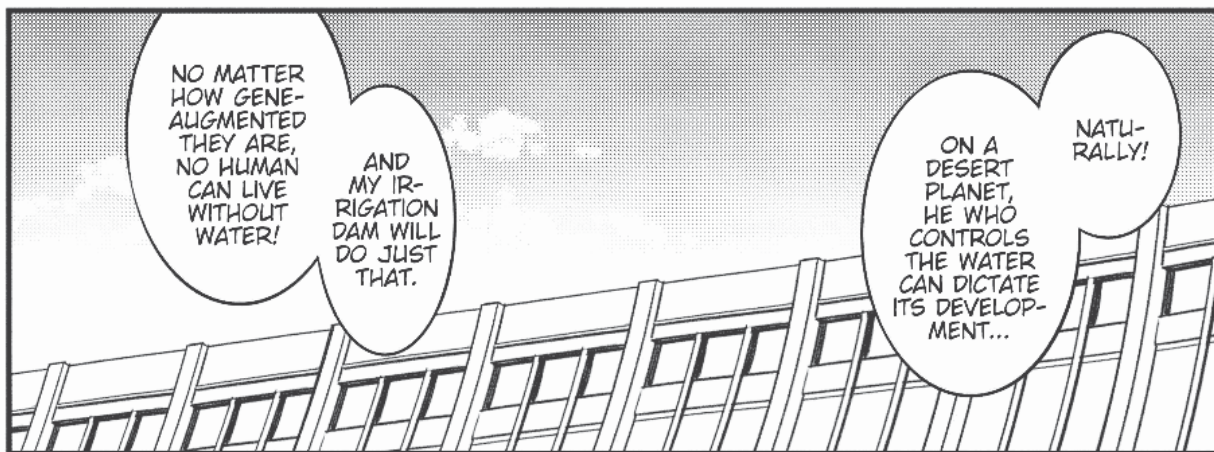
WELL
PLAYED, MR.
GOVERNOR.
TRULY A
MASTER-
STROKE!

I'D SAY
THAT'S ONE
PROBLEM
NICELY
WRAPPED
UP.



Read the rest in *My Father is a Unicorn* available now!



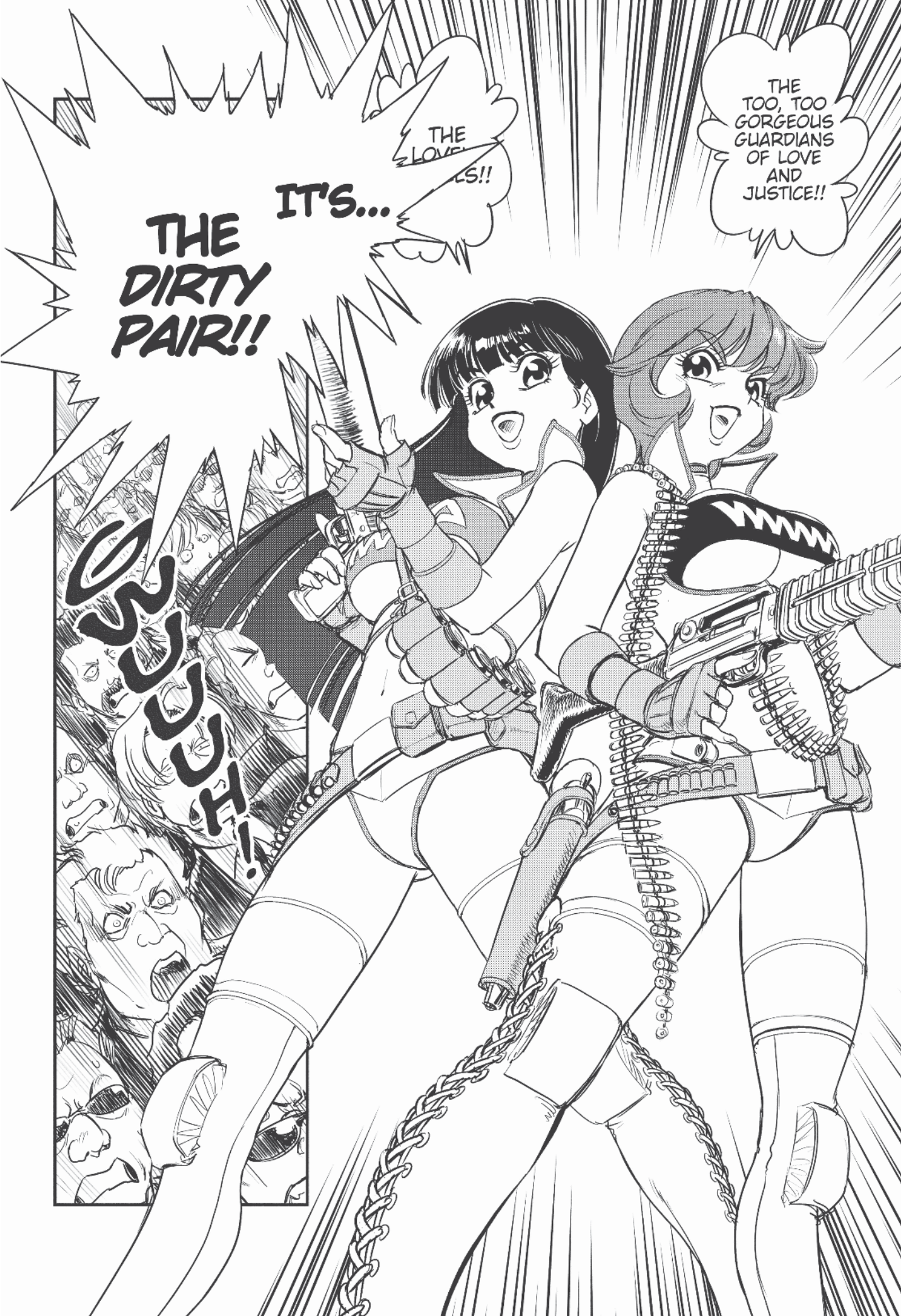


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Seven Seas - DIRTY PAIR OMNIBUS

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THE
DIRTY
PAIR!!

IT'S...

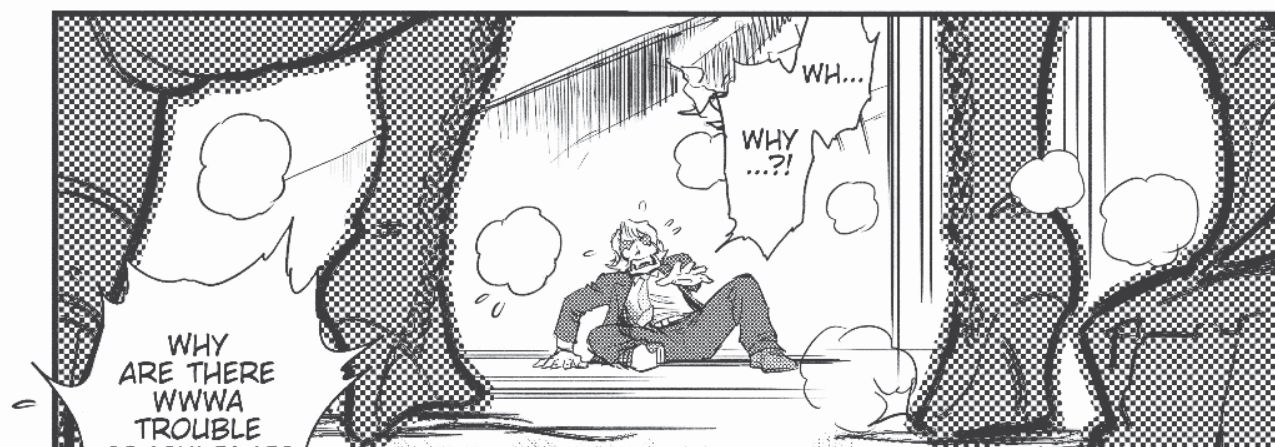
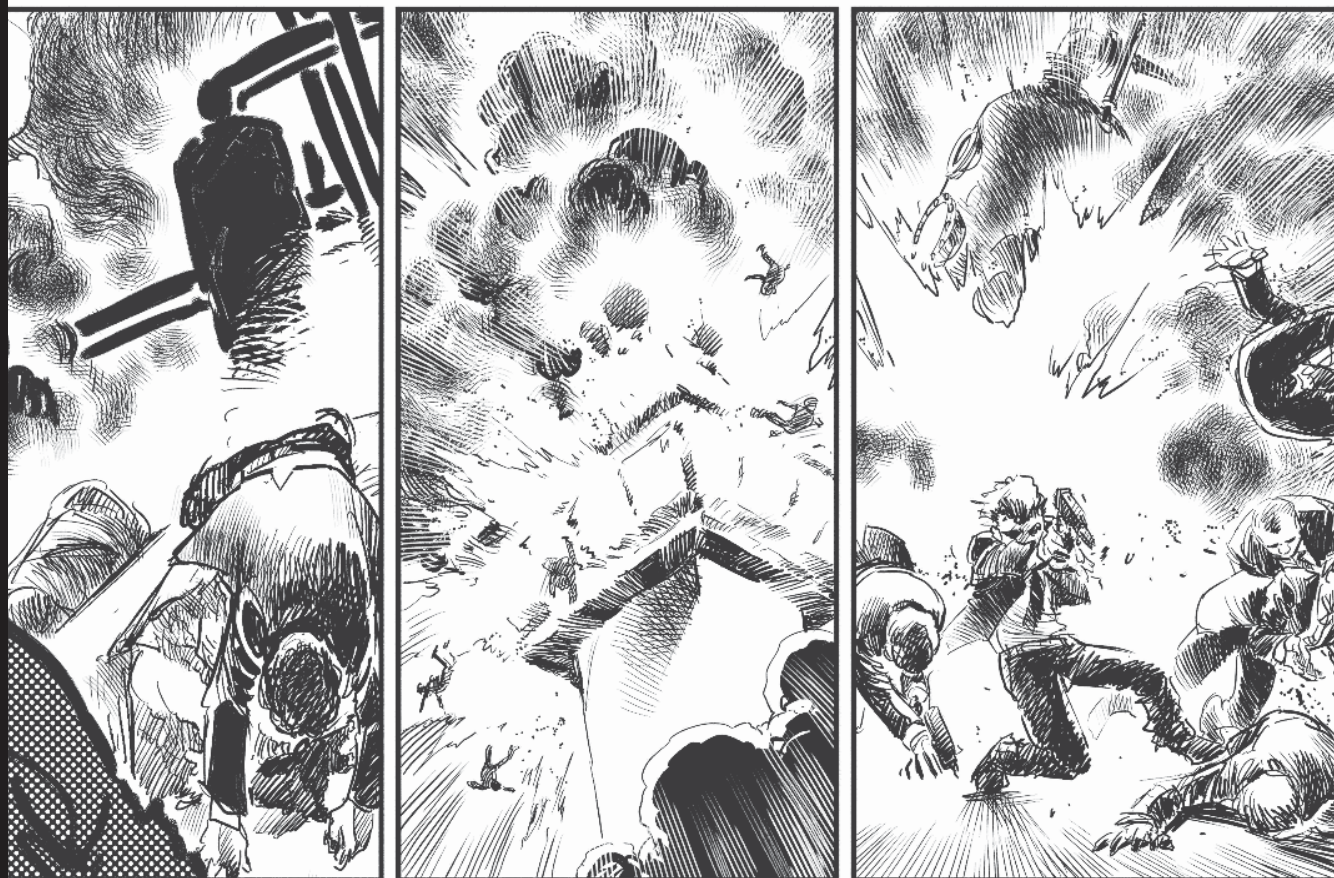
THE
LOVE
LS!!

THE
TOO, TOO
GORGEOUS
GUARDIANS
OF LOVE
AND
JUSTICE!!

SHU
H!!

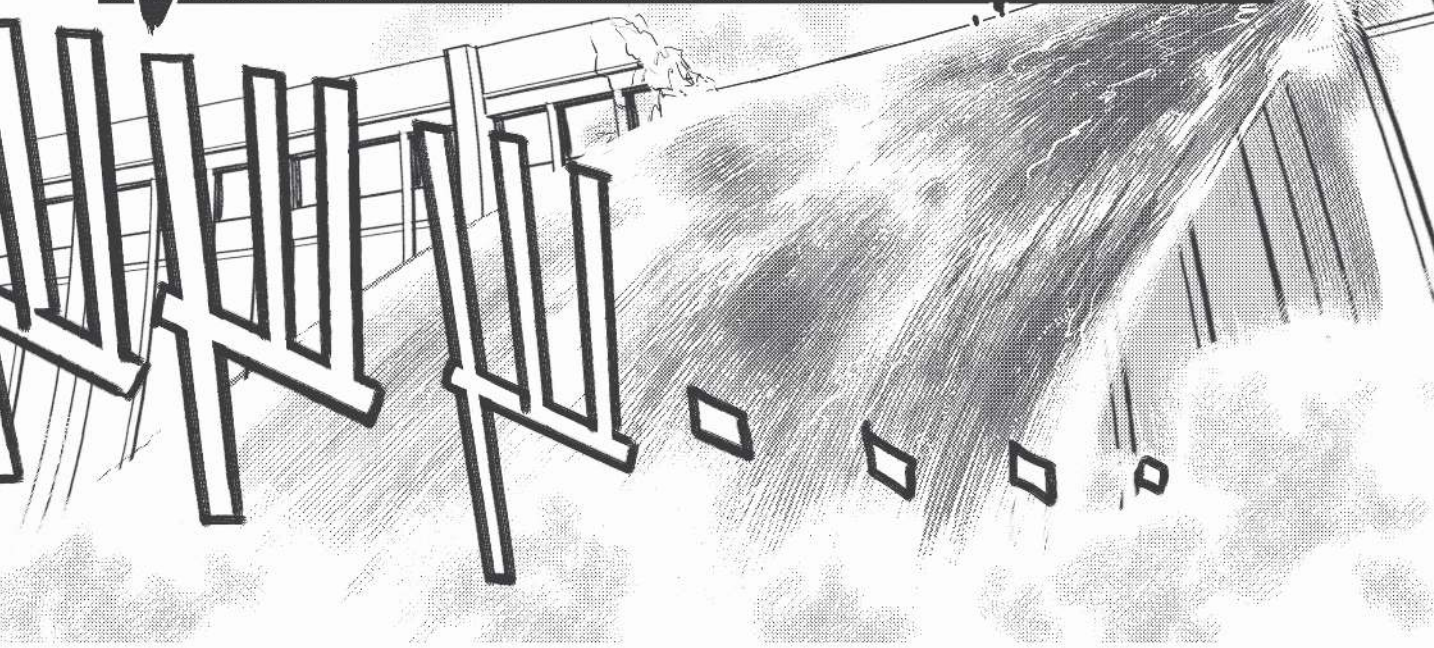
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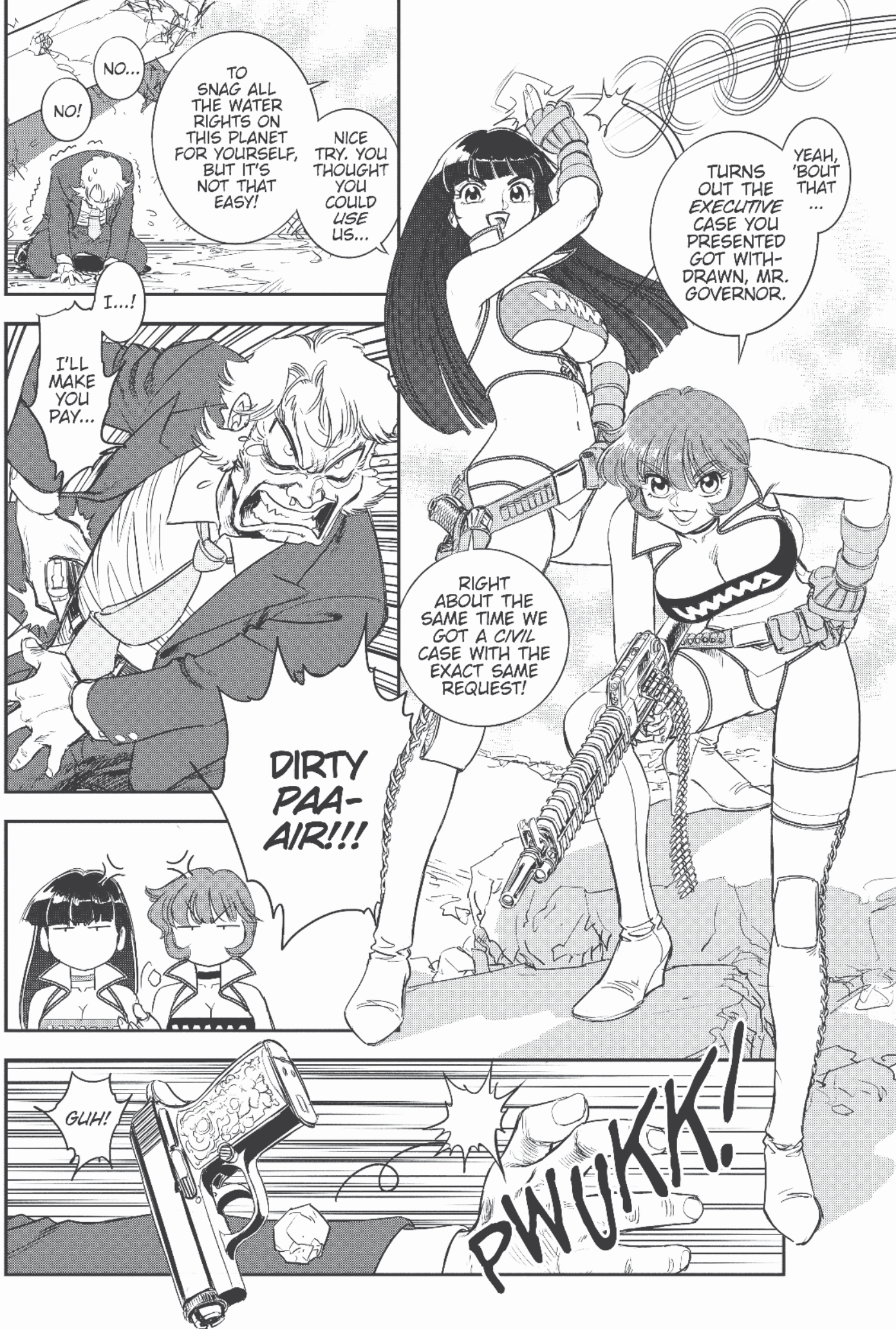
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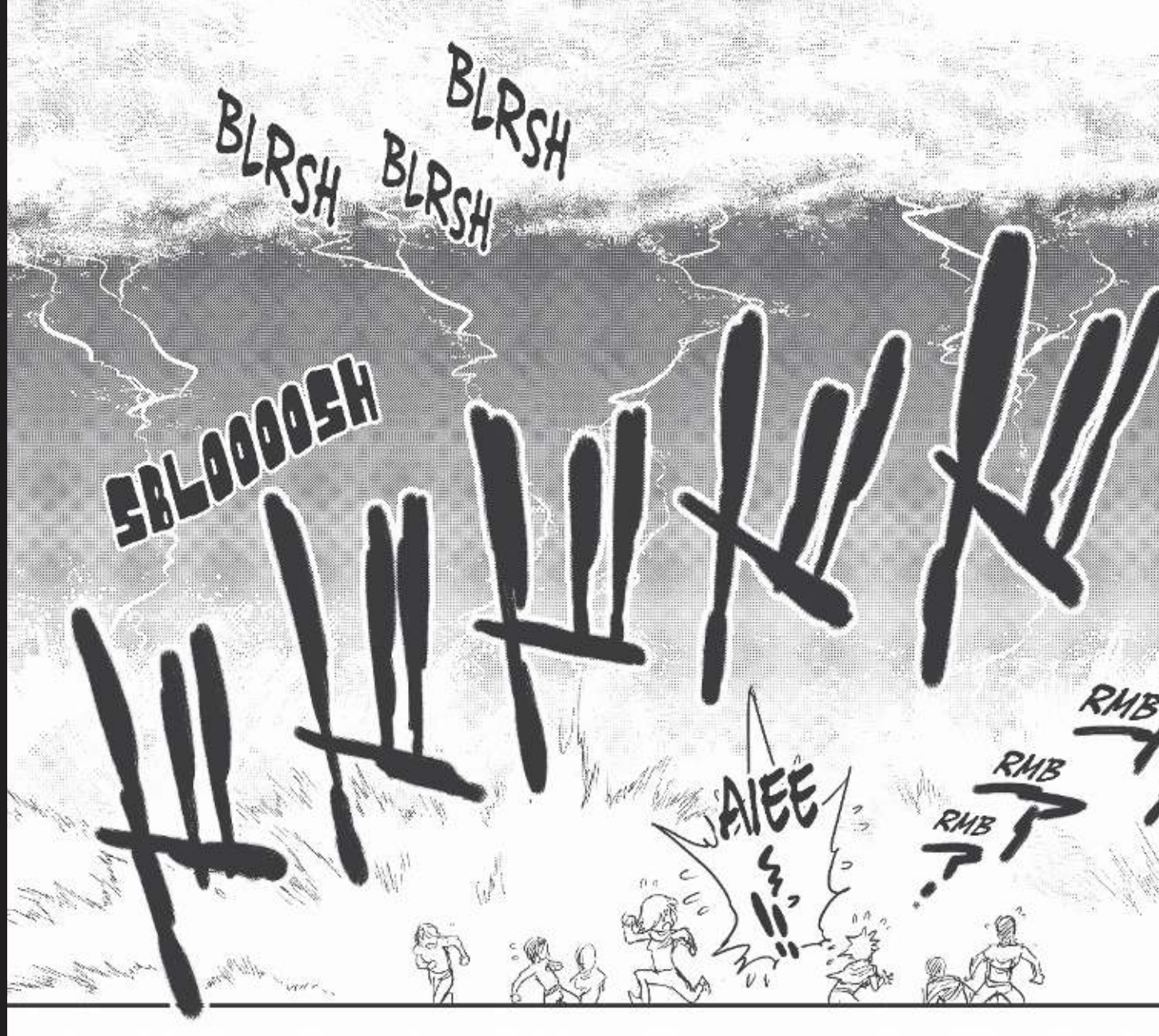


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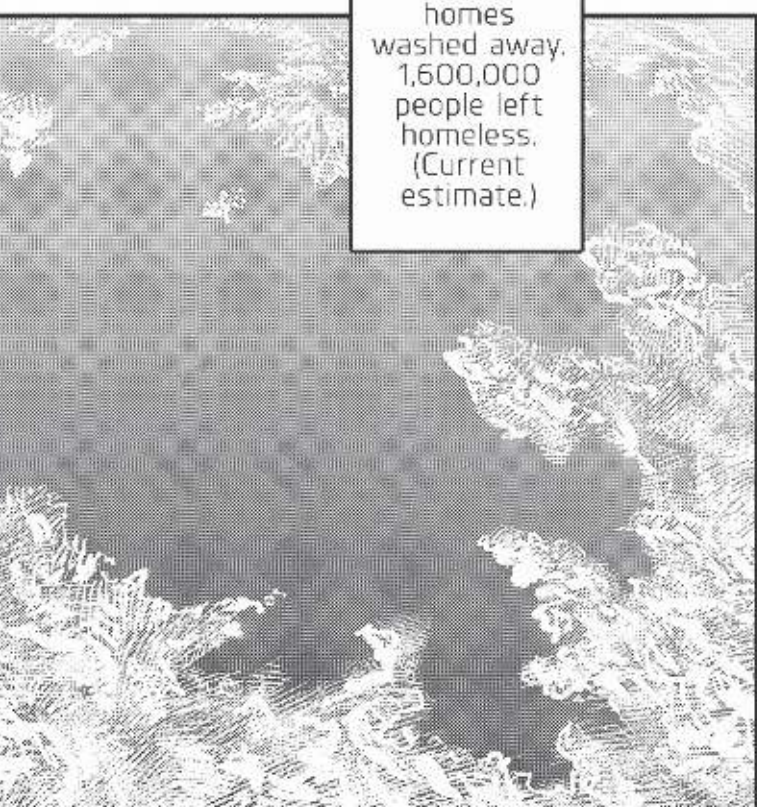
Humanity's technological advancements have reached the starfaring age, as colonies spread far and wide across the galaxy.

It's the latter end of the 22nd century.



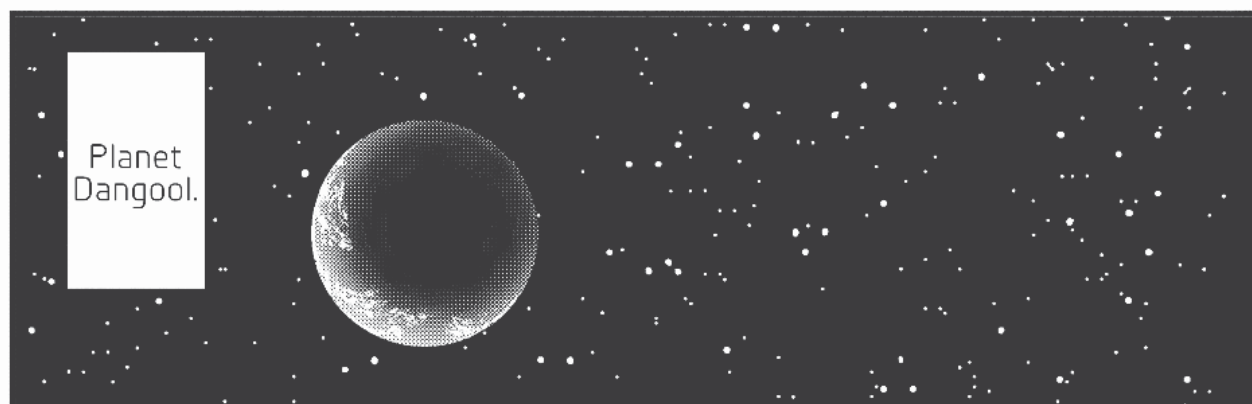


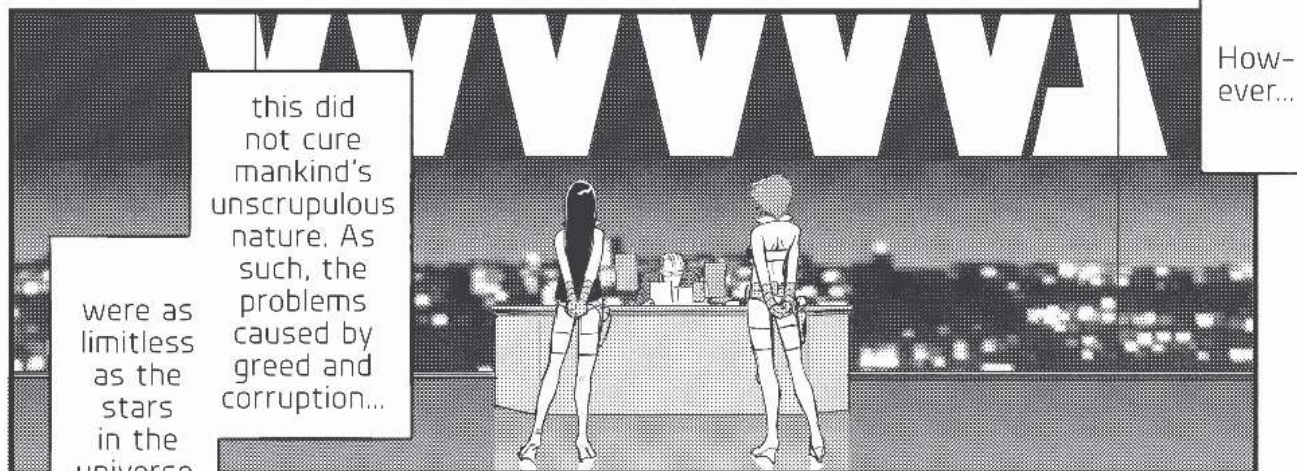
Planet Beego.
300,000 homes
washed away.
1,600,000 people left
homeless.
(Current estimate.)



Seven Seas - DIRTY PAIR OMNIBUS

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How-
ever...

this did
not cure
mankind's
unscrupulous
nature. As
such, the
problems
caused by
greed and
corruption...

were as
limitless
as the
stars
in the
universe.



Six years
earlier,
a minor
incident led
to great
calamity,
in which
humanity
was nearly
wiped out.



EHEH
HEH!

In the wake
of that crisis,
the Galactic
Federation
established
the Worlds
Welfare
and Works
Association
(WWWA).

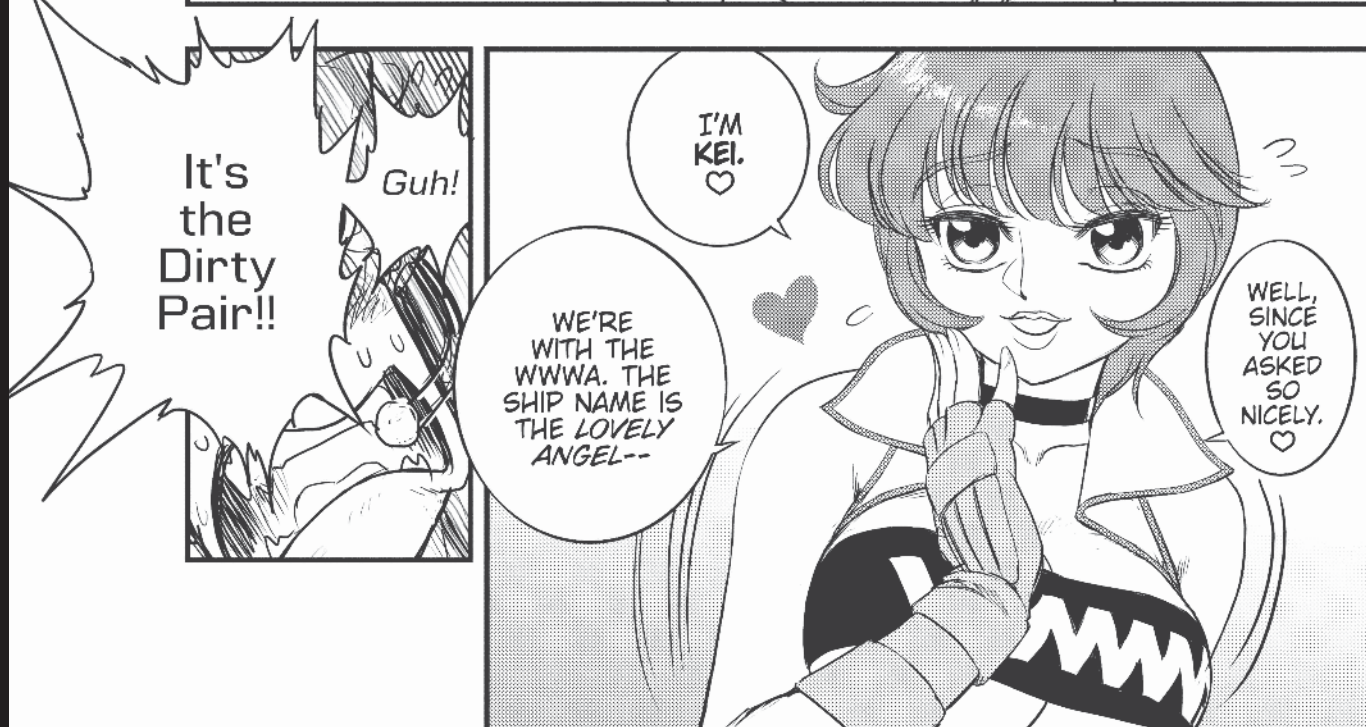
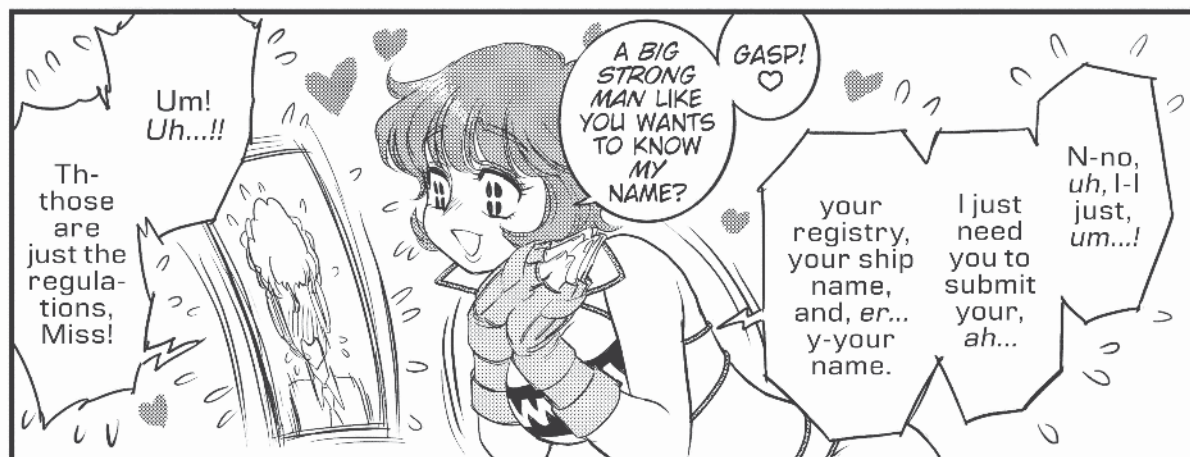


PANT
PANT

PANT
PANT

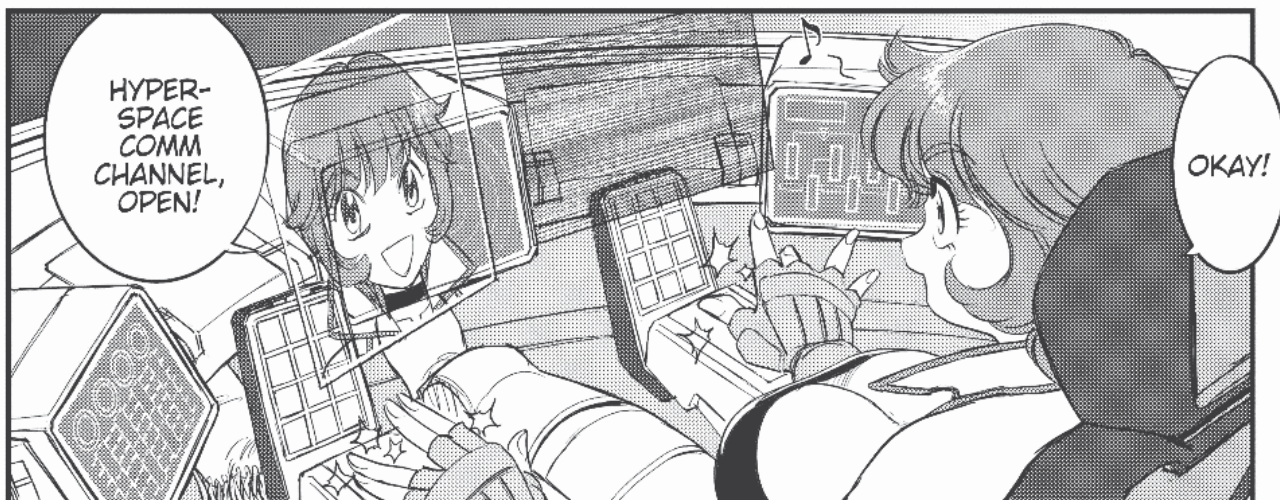
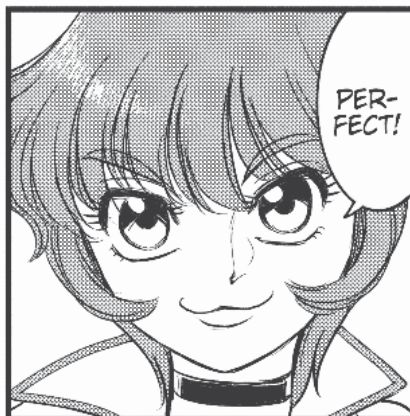
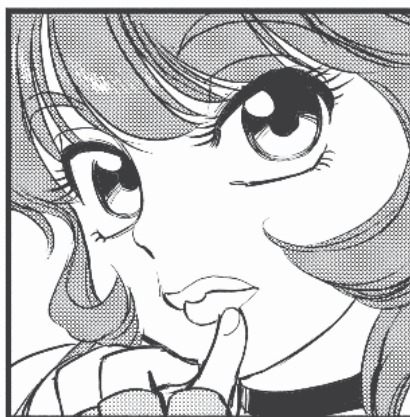
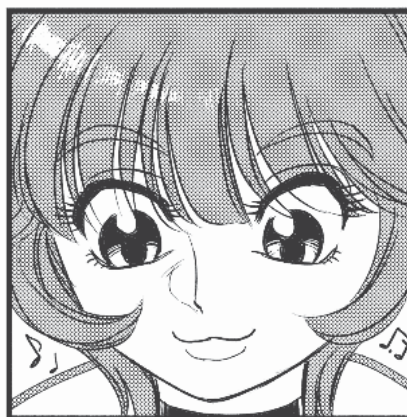
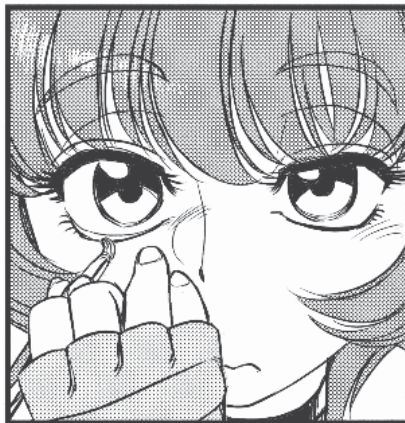
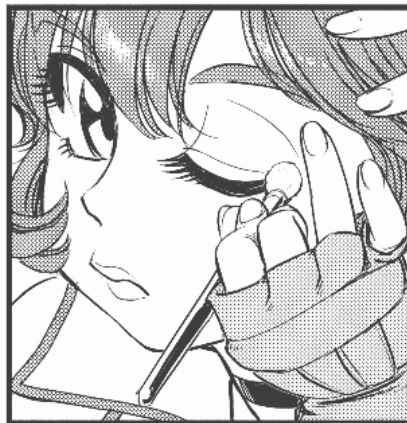
MRGH
...!

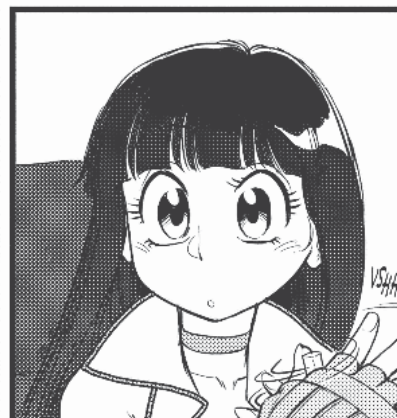
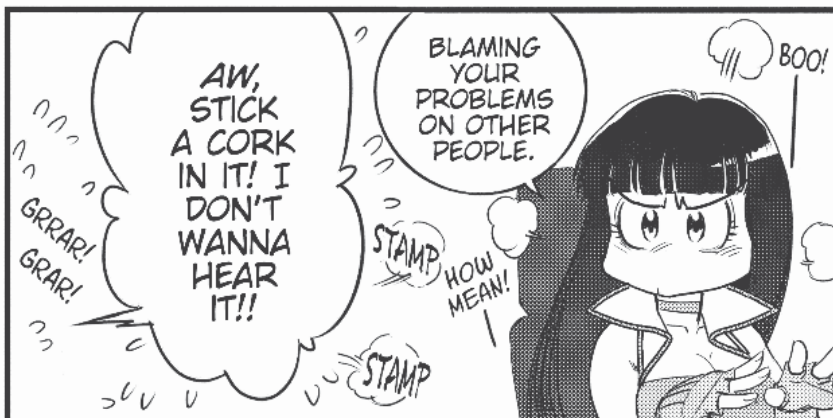
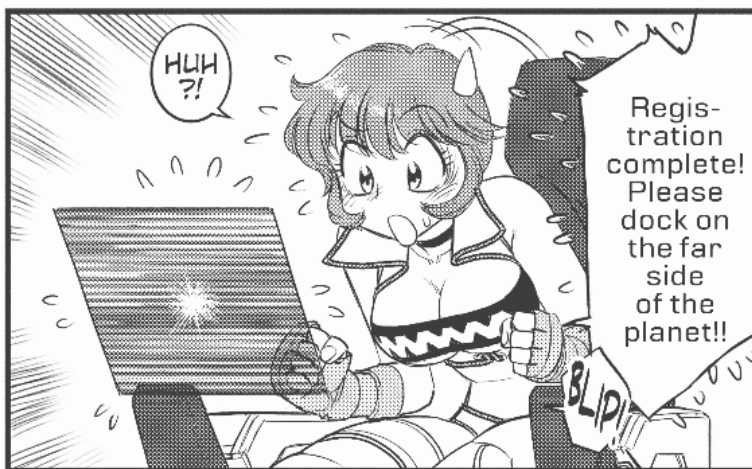
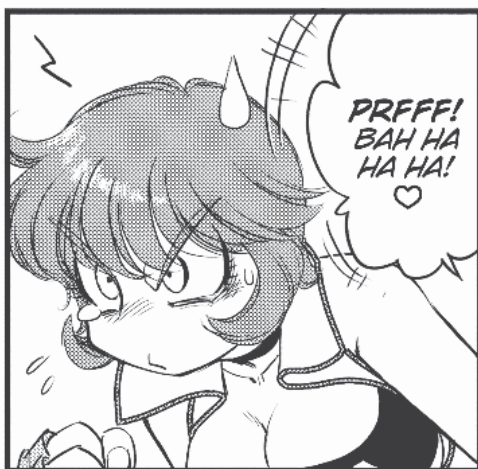
SHAKE
SHAKE



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Rules, Rules, Rules. The official rules are on page 92.

Viz Media

Sailor Moon Sailor Stars Part 2: (1 Winner)

Although the popularity of the idol group Three Lights is off the charts, Usagi hasn't realized that Seiya, Yaten and Taiki are the Sailor Star Lights. But with the number of Phage growing in the city, the purpose of star seeds is the biggest mystery that needs to be solved. Could the mysterious Chibi-Chibi hold the answer? The tide is turning, but not in Usagi's favor. Her allies are being overpowered, and altered timelines are confusing the fate she knows to be true: Mamoru is her true love, Neo Crystal Tokyo is her future kingdom and her fellow Guardians will be her eternal protectors...right? The ultimate battle with the chaotic Sailor Galaxia lies ahead, and the fate of all existence lies in the balance.

6-Disc Blu-ray & DVD Combo Pack.

17 episodes (184-200) at 1080p HD 4x3 Aspect Ratio.

English Stereo & Japanese Audio with English Subtitles

Features: Art Gallery, Cast Interviews, Trailers, Opening & Ending Songs



Sakura of America

Gelly Roll White (3 winners)

Sakura has perfected the smooth ink flow technology of GellyRoll® Classic™ White to now offer our most popular color in three nib sizes: 05 Fine, 08 Medium, and 10 Bold. The opaque white ink stands out on dark and colored papers and makes highlights pop in illustrations and comics. Elevate your art to another level using the range of thick and thin lines, small detail and unique bold marks.

<https://sakuraofamerica.com/gel-pen-white/>



Right Stuf via Nozomi Entertainment

Please Teacher! Blu-Ray (3 Winners)

Kei Kusanagi isn't your typical 15-year-old high school student. He's actually an 18-year-old with a rare disorder that puts him into what he calls, a "standstill"! When he was younger, this disorder left him in a deep coma which stunted his growth for three years. Mizuho Kazami isn't your typical teacher, either. She's actually an alien sent by the Galaxy Federation to observe the Earth! As the sole human being with knowledge of Ms. Kazumi's secret, Kei must... marry her?! Homework, dating, and a gorgeous wife going to school has never been quite this fun!

Format: Blu-ray, English and Japanese audio w/English subtitles. Available: NOW.



Mai Mai Miracle Blu-Ray (3 Winners)

Mai Mai Miracle is an anime film directed by Sunao Katabuchi who served as an Assistant Director on Kiki's Delivery Service and Directed In This Corner of the World and Black Lagoon.

Shinko, is a third grade elementary school student with a magically active imagination. She spends a lot of her time listening to her grandfather's history lessons, imagining what her town was like 1,000 years earlier. One day, a sad and sombre girl called Kiiko transfers to Shinko's school from Tokyo. A strong friendship soon grows between the two girls as Shinko helps Kiiko come out of her shell and deal with her loss - all thanks to their adventures, both imagined and real.

Format: Blu-ray, English and Japanese audio w/English subtitles. Available: NOW.

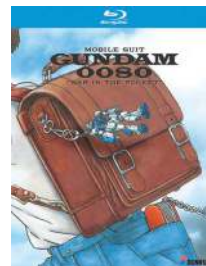


Sunrise, Inc. and Right Stuf, Inc.

Mobile Suit Gundam 0080 War In The Pocket Blu-Ray (6 Winners)

Universal Century 0079. When the Principality of Zeon learns of a new Gundam being built, the veteran spec-ops Cyclops Team is dispatched to the civilian colony of Libot to investigate. Their newest member, Bernard "Bernie" Wiseman, gets shot down in action and meets young Alfred "Al" Izuruha, who dreams of mobile suits and space battles. Al thinks of Bernie as a friend, and even goes to great lengths to track him down while on his mission. He doesn't realize the potential danger he's in. And Al's nextdoor neighbor Christina "Chris" Mackenzie returns home with a new "government job." She's really the test pilot of the top-secret Gundam Alex - the objective of Bernie's mission! As the story unfolds, three lives will be changed forever by this one small part of the war.

Format: Blu-ray, English and Japanese Language w/ English Subtitles Available: NOW.



LIFE DURING WARTIME



There's a common misconception among some Western film critics that Japanese cinema and animation is obsessed with The Bomb, no doubt fueled by films like *Akira*. But even within the genre of war stories Japanese artists have always had a range of stories to tell about the experience of World War II. In fact, one of the greatest war movies of all time is an anime film that barely makes reference to the atomic bomb at all: Studio Ghibli's classic *Grave of the Fireflies*. The film is getting a fancy new steelbook release from Sentai Filmworks, so I decided to grab a box of tissues and take a look back at this anime masterpiece.

When *Grave of the Fireflies* premiered in 1988 Ghibli had only produced a single feature film: *Castle in the Sky* (1986). Its founding directors, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, were far from household names but were well respected by fans after decades of stellar directing work at Toei Animation (*Lupin III*), Zuiyo Eizo (*Heidi, Girl of the Alps*), and Topcraft (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*). *Castle in the Sky* did moderately well in theaters, and when it hit TV for the first time in 1988 it finally blossomed into a hit for the studio. Two weeks later, Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies* arrived in theaters (see sidebar).

Based on a popular 1967 semi-autobiographical short story by World War II survivor Akiyuki Nosaka, the film tells the story of Seita and Setsuko, a brother and sister whose life is upended when they lose both their mother and their home in the firebombing of Kobe. Forced to stay with

distant relatives and later to strike out on their own, the siblings seek to carve out some kind of happiness amid the scarcity of war.

Grave of the Fireflies is the most famously "sad" anime ever made, the kind of movie that makes fans groan with grief at the mere mention of its name. It's no exaggeration, either—the film is bleak and uncompromising for almost the entire hour and a half, with only brief rays of joy breaking through the clouds. It's ironic that it's so often erroneously attributed to Hayao Miyazaki since *Grave of the Fireflies* is the kind of work Miyazaki would never create. Miyazaki's stories are typically full of imagination and adventure. Isao Takahata, by contrast, came from the traditions of French New Wave and Italian neorealist cinema (see sidebar). Despite being an animation director, Takahata often told stories about the vulgar and the mundane, about regular people facing challenges without any hope of magical intervention.

In *Grave of the Fireflies* we see untold devastation as Kobe is reduced to ruin by American firebombing raids. We see people's bodies burned to a crisp with maggots crawling across their skin (a stark contrast to the typically round, friendly character designs of Studio Ghibli). Notably absent is the atomic bomb, though the film illustrates the often forgotten historical reality that the air raids killed far more civilians with conventional weapons than atomic ones.

Even more disturbing than the imagery, however, is the dark side of human nature that Taka-



STUDIO GHIBLI'S
HARROWING WAR
STORY **GRAVE OF
THE FIREFLIES**
REMAINS ONE
OF ANIME'S
GREATEST WORKS.

By Evan Minto



GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES IS A SEARING INDICTMENT OF THE INDIFFERENCE AND CRUELTY OF WAR, AND REPRESENTS ONE OF THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ANIMATED MEDIUM.

hata uncovers over the course of the story. The war itself is only felt as a cold and inhuman rain of firebombs. What stings much more is Seita and Setsuko's increasing isolation as resources dwindle and people begin to turn on them.

The roughly four-year-old Setsuko is the heart of the story, and its strongest moments of warmth and humor come from her almost impossible sweetness and innocence. We don't feel the gut-wrenching tragedy of the story when someone dies. We feel it when watching Seita's increasingly futile attempts to protect Setsuko from the harsh reality that surrounds her.

Through it all Takahata weaves a contrast between the socioeconomic classes of wartime society. When a desperate Seita raids houses in the city to get money for food, we see perfectly maintained homes unspoiled by war, while he and his sister languish in unthinkable poverty.

It's easy to read *Grave of the Fireflies* as tragedy porn. After all, many of its story beats can be summed up as "and then things got worse." Its tragedy feels inevitable; Seita and Setsuko suffer and suffer, and it's hard to imagine anything they could do differently to save

TAKAHATA THE NEOREALIST

One of Isao Takahata's favorite directors was Roberto Rossellini, a member of the Italian neorealist movement in the 1940s and 1950s. Rossellini and the neorealists were obsessed with depicting the real world and all of its gritty imperfections. To do so they pioneered new techniques including shooting almost entirely on location and using nonprofessional actors. In one famous case, Rossellini recruited a young woman from a local village for his film *Paisà*. Upon discovering that she was illiterate and couldn't read the script, he threw it out and coached her through an improvised version of the scene.

Obviously, an animator can't shoot on location, but Takahata successfully translated much of the ethos of neorealist cinema into animation, with *Grave of the Fireflies* and his subsequent film *Only Yesterday* as the two strongest examples. The backgrounds in the former are simple and naturalistic, with none of the whimsy of a Miyazaki film. The character designs from Yoshifumi Kondo (later the director of *Whisper of the Heart*) have the usual Ghibli squishiness, but there's a hint of more realistic facial muscles in the dialogue scenes—a technique Kondo developed to its most extreme form in *Only Yesterday*. Most of all, Takahata carries over the neorealist concern for the working class and the oppressed, the people who, as Thoreau said, "lead lives of quiet desperation."



DOUBLE FEATURE PREMIERE

Grave of the Fireflies arrived in theaters in 1988 as a double feature with another Studio Ghibli movie, probably the most unlikely companion of all: *My Neighbor Totoro*. Many fans assume this was because *Grave of the Fireflies* would be too depressing and Ghibli wanted to include a crowd-pleasing fantasy movie along with it, but it was almost the opposite. *Totoro* was considered more of a long shot, since it was a departure from Miyazaki's home field of fantasy adventures (*Nausicaä*, *Castle in the Sky*). *Grave of the Fireflies*, on the other hand, was based on a popular work of literature and was likely to draw a crowd. As it turns out, both movies did only modest box office numbers, but *Totoro* ultimately won out when the merchandise from the movie began to catch on.



themselves. But that's the point of the movie. It's not presenting us with a solution or a call to action. It's simply asking us to bear witness to their pain. Takahata's shot composition is appropriately stark and conservative, with little in the way of moving cameras or aerial shots. When the music kicks in, it does so at unexpected times and disappears shortly thereafter. We are left alone to take in *Grave of the Fireflies'* most raw and vulnerable moments without the crutch of musical accompaniment.

Grave of the Fireflies has rarely been surpassed in the more than 30 years since its premiere, either by live-action or animated film, though Sunao Katabuchi's *In This Corner of the*

World (2016) features an equally powerful animated account of life during wartime. Katabuchi's directing itself has a hint of neorealism—an obsession with accurately recreating locations and costumes, a focus on plain and ordinary characters—that likely stems from his early work with Isao Takahata. Takahata passed away in 2018, but the impacts of *Grave of the Fireflies* are still being felt today. It's a searing indictment of the indifference and cruelty of war, and represents one of the greatest achievements of the animated medium.

***Grave of the Fireflies* is available from Sentai Filmworks.**



By Brittany Vincent

STRAIGHT SHOOTER



IN the near future, humanity has transcended the typical functional and cosmetic surgical enhancements that we all know these days. Forget silicone injections or simple prosthetic limbs. In this world, humans are adopting cybernetic “extensions,” completely overhauling their bodies in some cases. Take the Resolver Juzo Inui, for example, who has a menacing revolver for a head. His body is essentially a weapon, which is great news given that he makes a living as a private detective who takes on cases related to other “Extended,” as the individuals who modify their bodies are called.

In this grim world, Juzo’s forced to take on several missions to resolve problems other Extended have caused. He makes a pretty tidy living for himself and tends to mind his own business—until one fateful day, when he meets a peculiar Extended who begs him to save a young boy named Tetsuro. From there, *No Guns Life* spirals into an intriguing, action-packed look at the lives of the Extended and Berühren Corp., the megalomaniacal company that seeks to use them as tools. Strap in, because you’re in for one weird ride.

DON'T OVER-EXTEND YOURSELF

Juzo is the central focus of *No Guns Life*, and he’s one of the most fascinating characters in the series. For one, you may be wondering why he has a gun for a head in the first place, since it’s basically the first thing you notice about him beyond his lengthy trench coat, khaki pants, and dark T-shirt. His revolver head is fully functional and it even features a working trigger in the back—except no one’s allowed to pull it except the one

Strap in, because
you're in for one weird
ride with *No Guns Life*.



NO GUNS LIFE MAY SHARE THEMATIC SIMILARITIES WITH OTHER NEO-NOIR CYBERPUNK ANIME TITLES, BUT IT'S A UNIQUE AND THRILLING ADVENTURE THAT HAS TO BE SEEN TO BE BELIEVED.

person he trusts completely. His right hand can also be used as a gun, making him a formidable warrior and weapon, though he's quick to remind anyone that he's no tool.

This mindset comes from the past, where he fought in a war alongside soldiers in a pack called the "Gun Slave Unit." His body's been "Over-Extended," as such, with most of his human parts replaced by mechanical augmentations. He's a straight shooter, a justice-minded man, who hates humidity (he's afraid his head might rust) and kids. He's efficient with his job, and makes sure he always takes care of the client, even if it means endangering himself. He also loves to smoke. No particular reason—but he prefers his Tanegashima brand over anything else. But kids? No way.

That's why it's so odd that Juzo ends up risking life and limb to help one. Juzo's work as a Resolver takes him through a myriad of strange situations, but none so odd as the story of Tetsuro, whose predicament leads him on a wild ride that changes everything he knows about himself (which is very little, as an amnesiac) and the city he lives in.

LIVING IN "HARMONY"

One day, a rogue Extended breaks into Juzo's office while he's out working on a few cases. He begs Juzo to save a boy he's carrying with him named Tetsuro. Juzo is clearly hesitant to do so, but acquiesces, as there seems to be something deeper and darker afoot. He ends up taking the boy to the safest place he knows, but the nefarious Berühren Corp. has other issues. The massive company has no qualms with experimenting on (many would say torturing) Extended and other devices and, as such, they want Tetsuro back. A particularly nasty agent named Karen tries to thwart Juzo's plans to take Tetsuro to safety, leading to a knock-down, drag-out fight.

As it turns out, Tetsuro is part of an important experiment that Berühren Corp. is running, related to a new technology called "Harmony." It lets users remote control any Extended from another location, but it's still very much in its infancy when Juzo meets Tetsuro. The malevolent corporation has also seen to it that its guinea pigs can't escape—not easily, at least—by cutting the tendons in their wrists and heels and severing their vocal cords. Ouch.

Using Tetsuro as their guinea pig, they're working to perfect the technique, but for what reason? All of this and more will become clear throughout *No Guns Life*, but the explosive beginning will anchor you to your seat before you know it.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS

This neo-noir detective story is a compelling character study with crazy, out-there designs, quirky players, and a gritty art style that even gives Juzo some fun expressions and quips here and there.

First off, there's Juzo's engineer friend Mary Steinberg. She's a powerhouse of a maintenance tech when it comes to Extended, and even offers to help hide Tetsuro while Juzo figures things out to keep him safe. She has flaxen hair that's tied in a lengthy braid and can usually be found looking tired and a little disheveled. But she's the best at what she does.

There's also Tetsuro, of course, who you get to learn a lot more about farther on down the line. Along with Tetsuro, Mary, Juzo's neighbor Scarlett, and his caring landlord Christina, he's





able to solve the seemingly overbearing cases that come his way—all without pulling that trigger of his ... yet. Each player has their own individual back story that shines through every chapter of the tale, and getting to know them all is a real pleasure.

PULL THE TRIGGER

No Guns Life may share thematic similarities with other titles in the genre, but it's a unique and thrilling adventure that has to be seen to be believed. The predicaments other Extended get themselves into as well as Juzo's own background are reason alone to plunk yourself down and settle in for the long haul.

If you're looking for something a little off the beaten path that feels foreboding and effortlessly cool at the same time, the tale of Juzo and his brethren will leave you ready to take this exciting ride all over again. Just don't go around thinking turning yourself into a cyborg with a revolver for a head is a great idea or anything. Juzo doesn't even have lips, you know.

***No Guns Life* is available from Funimation.**



PLAY IT AGAIN, JUZO

If you enjoy what you see in *No Guns Life*, chances are you'll dig the neo-noir and cyberpunk anime genre, which shares several themes with other popular series you may have heard of. If by the end of *No Guns Life* you're dying for more, you might consider checking out *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, which ticks all the boxes when it comes to humans augmenting their bodies and the strange situations that come with it as well as the air of uneasiness that occasionally surrounds such actions.

You should also consider watching one of the classics: *Cowboy Bebop*. Spike Spiegel is a bounty hunter who takes on cases for cash but amasses quite the motley crew while on his adventures throughout the galaxy. He shares a lot in common with Juzo, such as the fact that he doesn't really like kids but has one with him anyway. And a dog. And a woman, which he "can't stand." He's really just a big ol' softie, after all. Now, you won't find another anime series with a main character who has a gun for a head, but ... work with us, here.







IMAGINE, if you will, the game that is life being more like The Game of Life. Sure, luck would still play a significant role in the course of events, but the rules and goal would be clear and concise enough to be outlined on the lid of a cardboard box. Becoming fabulously rich and retiring in style would be great, but even if you end up as a penniless philosopher, you'd still have a fun time getting there. Your biggest concern would be if your family of pink and blue pegs spills out of your packed minivan, a plastic catastrophe scattered across the tiled road. Produced by the illustrious animation studio known as Madhouse, the anime adaptation of *No Game No Life*, a top-selling light novel series, presents a proposition akin to this. So what would you do? Would you stick with reality as you know it or brave the unknown in a world created in the image of a board game?

Answering the above barely requires a moment's thought for 18-year-old Sora and his 11-year-old sister, Shiro. Sora is what one could call a NEET. That is to say he is not engaged in employment, education, or professional training. With soft-spoken Shiro, also a shut-in, at his side, Sora spends all day every day holed up in a disarrayed room, lit only by the glow of wall-to-wall monitors. Together, they form Blank, an undefeated team of online gamers consisting of four nameless avatars, with each sibling controlling a pair. At least, such is the arrangement until Shiro dozes off, leaving Sora to maneuver her characters with his feet. Shiro has never lost in any game, digital or otherwise, to anyone but her brother, and vice versa.

YOU BET YOUR LIFE!

No Game No Life remains the highwater mark for isekai anime. | **BY KRISTINA KOTSAMANIDIS**

This holds true even when a mystery entity challenges Blank to a chess match and gives the pair a real run for their money. Said individual asks the siblings if they've ever felt as if they were born in the wrong world, which hits them where it hurts. Ostracized by their peers—Shiro for her abnormally high IQ and Sora for his exceptional ability to read people—they've both found the world a frustrating place, one that is chaotic, unreasonable, and unfair. So when queried what they'd think of a world in which everything is decided via simple games, Sora confidently responds that, yes, they were born in the wrong world if such a place exists.

Within seconds of completing his sentence, he and Shiro are reborn in the world of Disboard, where they are greeted by its childlike ruler, Tet, the god of play. In this realm, all adheres to Tet's 10 pledges. Murder, war, and robbery are forbid-

den, as all conflict is to be resolved through games. A wager must be made in every game, and anything may be bet, even national borders, as long as bets are of equal value. After Tet lays out his ground rules, he sends Sora and Shiro on their merry way in this strange but visually stunning land, where megalithic chessmen tower over the horizon, bathed in iridescence. The siblings get the ball rolling by winning games for gear and gold, to clothe their backs, feed their stomachs, and put a roof over their heads, but before the first episode comes to a close, they're already embroiled in a tournament to select the next sovereign of Elkia, the last territory belonging to humans.

While Disboard may sound more like Las Vegas than your typical isekai setting, it features many of the staples fantasy fanatics know and love. Gargantuan dragons swoop overhead, and humans are but one of 16 intelligent races, the weakest at that, with zero affinity for magic. Others include elves, the animal-like Warbeasts, and the winged Flugel. Unlike leads in other isekai anime, the protagonists of *No Game No Life* aren't remotely concerned with determining a way to return home. Instead, they focus fully on advancing their position in Disboard. The scale of the games and gambles grows dramatically, at a blistering pace, and Shiro and Sora gain a number of allies—perhaps more accurately described as pawns—as matters progress. One could argue that Sora pieces together a harem for himself, consid-

WITH A STRIKING SATURATED AESTHETIC AND ABSURDLY OVER-THE-TOP BATTLES
NO GAME NO LIFE
HAS THE GOODS TO WARRANT DITCHING THE REAL WORLD TEMPORARILY, OF COURSE FOR A SPIN.

GO FOR BROKE

If you're hungry for more *No Game No Life* content, you may want to first look into *No Game No Life Zero*, a film that adapts the sixth light novel. Rather than advancing the plot from where the television program ends, it focuses on backstory and world-building. After this, English speakers have no choice but to turn toward print.

Strangely, the licenses for the light novels and manga have been split between two publishers. Yen Press, under the Yen On label, localizes the light novels, and with the 10th volume due for release in February 2020, this series, which won a Sugo! Japan Award from *Yomiuri Shinbun*, one of the best-selling newspapers in the world, portrays the largest portion of Sora and Shiro's adventures. Yen Press has also published a four-volume spin-off manga titled *No Game No Life, Please!* If the verbal tic isn't a dead giveaway, this is centered on the warbeast ambassador Izuna Hatsuse.

Yuu Kamiya, who is actually a Brazilian-born author and artist named Thiago Furukawa Lucas, is notable for doing double duty, both writing and illustrating the light novels, though this has come with controversy, as he's been plagued by accusations of tracing. His wife, Mashiro Hiiragi, assisted him when he was ill, and her drawings led to a collaboration on a manga adaptation of the light novel series. Localized by Seven Seas Entertainment, this is ongoing, but it's been serialized irregularly, such that only two volumes have been released thus far, over four years apart.





ering the supporting cast is virtually all female, but there is little in the way of fawning.

However, time is occasionally expended on fanservice, and though these slapstick scenes, along with a bounty of gags referencing everything from *Doraemon* to *Phoenix Wright*, provide a break from the tension of the games, they're precious minutes that could've been spent further advancing the overarching plot. The show ends on a cliffhanger, with plenty left to be done, yet despite over a half decade passing since its original broadcast and the novels continuing since, we're still without a second cour.

Madhouse has a reputation for leaving its audience wanting more, and this is certainly preferable to a series wearing out its welcome. After all, it's not as if there are no options for those who want to carry on the journey with Sora and Shiro, as long as one's open to different mediums. The fact *No Game No Life* has motivated so many viewers to follow the franchise, or simply revisit for another run, even as the isekai genre grows more crowded with each year, is a testament to the appeal of the show's striking saturated aesthetic and absurdly over-the-top battles. *No Game No Life* has the goods to warrant ditching the real world—temporarily, of course—for a spin.

***No Game No Life* is available from Sentai Filmworks.**





WILD



By Michael Goldstein

HEART!



© Izumi Tsubaki/SQUARE ENIX, GEKKAN SHOJO NOZAKI KUN Project



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Love is in the air and in your anime! We're listing some of the most romantic shows to get all of your feelings aflutter.

EVERYBODY loves a little love wherever they go, so it's not hard to understand the fascination with romance stories; chalk it up to the sweeter moments in life—your first kiss, those days when you just want to cuddle or simply want to Netflix and Chill. Right now, 'tis the season to be lovey-dovey, whether you're a hopeless romantic or if you've already reeled someone in. With Valentine's Day around the corner, we're listing 12 of the hottest love boats for every anime fan for when you've got a budding crush and can't spit out the right words, or if you just want to binge the night away with your special one like there's no tomorrow.

Something Funny?

First, we have the shows that emphasize the "comedy" in "romantic comedy." The best series to start with is the classic *Ouran High School Host Club*, which chronicles the hijinks of the Host Club, a group of handsome men who entertain the girls of the over-the-top-wealthy Ouran Academy, and Haruhi Fujioka, a girl roped into masquerading as a boy in order to work off her extraordinary debt after breaking an antique vase. *Ouran* makes fun of a lot of the conventions of the romantic comedy, especially those found in shojo manga, and Haruhi is a great lead with a hilarious no-nonsense attitude

that constantly clashes with the rest of the eccentric cast.

While love is a funhouse in *Ouran*, it's a war zone with little room for survivors in *Kaguya-sama: Love is War*. Kaguya Shinomiya and Miyuki Shirogane want each other hard, but both teens are too proud to admit their feelings to each other; so begins a hysterical battle of wits to see who will be the first to confess, thus being the "loser," in this crazy game called love. *Kaguya-sama* takes the standard shojo conventions and cranks the dial up to 11 and makes the awkwardness in their interactions the primary source of entertainment instead of an obstacle in front of



ing the subject of dealing with trauma, its big personalities, and its contemplation of love and its interrogation of drawing your strength from empathy. And Tohru, for someone who doesn't second guess living in the woods just so she doesn't have to ask if she can stay with her friends and feel like a burden, has an amazing amount of growth from the moment she joins the Somas.

Another anime with enough emotional baggage to fill a small airplane is *Toradora!*, which details the intricate tangled dumpster fire that is teenage love between Ryuji Takasu, Taiga Aisaka, Minori Kushieda, Yusaku Kitamura, and Ami Kawashima. It's not only a story involving old-school romcom hijinks, zany matchmaker schemes, and love-quadrangle dramedy; it's also a story of personal turmoil and the masks people put on to keep their inner selves concealed from the rest of society. To make things brief, *Toradora!* places characters over the usual romcom conventions. In a way, this battle of archetypes and reality is much like the battle of the minds in *Kaguya-sama*—both shows deal with the walls people put up so no one can see their true selves.

Finally, there is *The Ancient Magus' Bride*, which tells the story of Chise Hatori, a young 15-year-old who is purchased as an apprentice to the inhuman Elias Ainsworth. Although Elias is clearly not a normal magical being, he still treats Chise with kindness and even vows to marry her in the future, despite probably not knowing what a wife is. While this show is more of a dark fantasy than a shojo romance, a lot of shojo conventions are still there to make you think otherwise. It's definitely an unusual relationship, but *Magus' Bride* is well aware of that fact and takes careful steps to escape that reality. What ultimately makes the story stick out is its fantastic world building and its emphasis on relational and personal growth and improving yourself each day.

Something Sweet?

For fans looking for some sweet sugar to go with their French fries, *Takagi-san* and *Tsuredure Children* are great choices. In the former title, romantic comedy is achieved through innocent middle school embarrassment in the most commonplace situations, and the overall tone is playful and sweet in its antics. No matter how hard Nishikata tries, he just can't seem to push Takagi's buttons the same way she pushes his in their prank war (though, it's not so much a war as it is a 12-episode one-sided slaughter!). The show is also careful to make sure that none of the teasing comes off as mean-spirited (no bullying nonsense!).

The latter title, however, doesn't deal with a single pairing—it's a humorous anthological show that manages to squeeze in as many unique couple dynamics within 12 15-minute episodes (and some couples are more premier

©Yuyuko Takemiyama/ASCII Mediaworks/[Toradora] Production Committee



the final hookup. Yet their 12th-dimensional chess game is amazingly grounded in the way real-life teens think.

But the award for the best lampooning of shojo conventions has to go to *Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun*, in which the peppy Chiyo Sakura learns that her crush is also her favorite shojo manga artist and, ironically, knows jack squat about actual romance. *Nozaki-kun*, which plays out more like a sitcom than an actual romance, relishes in playing with people's expectations, especially in regard to its genre and characters (and it never punishes them for being different): case in point, Chiyo, who desperately wants to be in a classic shojo romance, yet keeps getting brutally disappointed when she realizes that she isn't.

Something Serious?

Here are some stories that, while much more dramatic than your standard fare, are perfect for anime goers who want some bite with their kisses. The most recent title on everyone's lips is *Fruits Basket*, which tells the story of Tohru Honda, who finds herself living with the Soma family after a personal tragedy leaves her living all by herself in a tent. But she quickly learns that this family has a dark secret: they turn into the animals of Chinese Zodiac when hugged by the opposite sex! The show has seen a resurgence in popularity thanks to its spring 2019 remake, the second season of which will be airing around the time you're reading this! What makes this show stand out from other romances is its emotional intelligence, especially regard-

If you want
some quality
**CUDDLE-AND-
KISSY-FACE**
time, here's
some anime
we suggest!



than others]; but it's very economic as it does so. But what *Tsuredure Children* excels at is its dialogue—it's short and right to the point without feeling rushed in any way. In addition, it also knows when to let its visuals do all the talking for them, in which the complexity of dialogue gives way to some epic faces and body reactions that really say it all. In *Tsuredure Children*, subplots are nonexistent comments; it just wants to show off the sweet candy filling at the center of the chocolate pop, metaphorically speaking.

Meanwhile, a less obvious candidate for most heartwarming romance is *Recovery of an MMO Junkie*, for two reasons: First, in a genre that's overpopulated with teenage protagonists, the fact that this show stars a thirtysomething societal shut-in, Moriko Morioka by name, is a refreshing pleasure. Second, and more importantly, in a charming romance complicated by the identities of the main couple's real-life and digital selves, the severe social anxiety issues that Moriko has are treated with a very honest and sympathetic lens, and the show is certainly aware of the disconnect Morioka has with her online persona and her real life. *MMO Junkie* is not about life "in" a video game, it's about how the real world and the online world collide.

Something LGBT?

LGBT folks have plenty of romances to pick from. For example, it would be easy to say that the recently aired *Given* is your run-of-the-mill boys' love romance. But what starts as a show simply about one man teaching another how to play the guitar quickly evolves into a character-driven dramedy that depicts a diverse range of challenging topics, such as suicide and coming out, with such a level of grace and dignity that you'll ultimately be cheering for an encore. And the musical performances aren't half bad either.

There's also the exceptional adaptation of *Bloom into You*. The show stars Yuu Koito, who suddenly finds herself on the receiving end of the love confession of her upper classmate Touko Nanami. From there, it manages to avoid most of the romantic clichés we've come to expect in shows like this. True, it takes some time for the main relationship to get going, but then again, it's hard to really know someone when you really don't know yourself first; and it's especially hard to identify real love when all you've known for most of your life is fiction. It's a beautiful story full of empathy and authenticity backed up by impressive production values.

A less obvious, but possibly the most unique, candidate for this category is the reverse isekai slice-of-life budding lesbian romance between a woman and her live-in maid who also happens to be a dragon in love with her. *Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid* has a goofy charm similar to *Ouran*, what with the titular character being the sane woman surrounded by much quirkier people (or in this case, dragons). But that's where the similarities end. True, Tohru (no relation to *Fruits Basket*) makes no secret of her (sometimes pervy) love for Kobayashi, but *Dragon Maid* has a stirring emotional core that's primarily about familial love—the fantastic creatures quickly falling into familiar roles, with Tohru being the mother and Kanna the daughter, and Kobayashi quickly learning how to be a parent, one dragon disaster at a time.

So, there you have it—some of the best romances to binge, all available on Crunchyroll. We might be several recommendations short (just to name a few, *Snow White with the Red Hair*, *The World Only God Knows*, *Gamers!*, *My Love Story!!*, *Wandering Son*, *A Silent Voice*, *Wotakoi*, and *Love, Chunibyo & Other Delusions*), but the anime listed are definitely the best places to start if you're looking for some quality cuddle-and-kissy-face time.



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Godzilla Ramen Years

New live-action releases

Godzilla: The Showa-Era Films, 1954-1975

After years of being impossible to assemble in one set due to different licensors, the entire Showa Godzilla series is available in a long-rumored deluxe collector's boxed set from Criterion. This release is sure to please casual fans who want the movies in high definition for a far cheaper price than importing the Blu-rays from Japan. It is, however, a little disappointing for the obsessed diehards: missing most of the US versions, containing subpar and outdated HD transfers for many of the films and odd, clumsy packaging. It should be noted that in this magazine we've reviewed these films many times so we will be focusing exclusively on the set and its attributes.

First off, the film is missing the exclusive US versions for many of the entries. *Only Godzilla*, *King of the Monsters* (the 1956 US version of *Godzilla*) and the 1963 US version of *King Kong*

vs. *Godzilla* are included. While, yes, the original Japanese versions with subtitles are usually a better aesthetic experience, any Godzilla fan born before the 1990s grew up with the English dubbed US versions on tape, television and, for the Gen-Xers and Boomers, the kiddie matinee and drive-in. The American versions *Gigantis*, *the Fire Monster* (the US version of *Godzilla Raids Again*), *Godzilla vs. the Thing* (*Mothra vs. Godzilla*), *Ghidorah*, *the Three Headed Monster*, *Godzilla vs. the Sea Monster* (*Ebirah*, *Horror of the Deep*), *Son of Godzilla*, *Destroy All Monsters*, *Godzilla's Revenge* (*All Monsters Attack*) and *Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster* (*Godzilla vs. Hedorah*) are all absent. Due to reasons unknown, speculated from royalty regulations involving some of the dub actors to a likely disdain for the faux Asian accents, Toho has decided to bury these versions.

It's a shame, because most contain quality

dubbing recorded at New York's Titra/Titan Productions that is far superior to Toho's own international versions. Titan's dubs have far better writing, voice acting and lip sync. The Tokyo and Hong Kong recorded international English dubs for *Invasion of Astro Monster* (actually an uncut version of the American dub), *Son of Godzilla*, *Destroy All Monsters*, *Godzilla vs. Megalon*, *Godzilla vs.*

Mechagodzilla and *Terror of Mechagodzilla* are included, but oddly, the previously readily available international dubs for *Ebirah*, *Horror of the Deep*, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* and *Godzilla vs. Gigan* are conspicuously missing. Many of the



AVAILABLE FROM
The Criterion Collection
ORIGINALLY RELEASED
2019
RUNNING TIME
1,295 Minutes



films are subtitle only, making introducing the films to small children (the intended audience of many entries) a lot more difficult. Regardless of where you stand on the whole “subs vs. dubs” debate, I think the US versions and dubs should be included for completion and nostalgia’s sake. There’s even talk that Toho may bury all the English dubs and have new ones recorded, as they made a recent announcement at Cannes outright denying the existence of many of the dubs(!).

The single most disappointing aspect is that there are no actual new transfers. Though the Criterion 2K scans of both versions of the 1954 *Godzilla* are ported over from their previous standalone release and Universal’s HD scan of the US *King Kong vs. Godzilla* is used, most of the films are the in-house Toho transfers. Produced in the 2000s, these transfers were made on (outdated even at the time) HiVision telecine equipment. Telecines digitize film in real time and now have been almost completely abandoned by the industry except to make dailies in favor of much better film scanners that scan each frame with precision. While Criterion has done its best to resuscitate the color, improve the black levels and remove the ugly green push many of the transfers have on the Japanese Blu-rays, they still are below standard for Criterion. The Kraken Blu-rays of *Ebirah*, *Hedorah* and *Gigan* contained HD film scans

done by Sony and put the Hi-Vision scans to complete and utter shame with deep blacks and vivid color. To make matters worse, rather than include each film on its own disc, the films are compressed two to three to a disc, resulting in bitrates lower than they should be.

Fairing particularly badly is the Japanese version of *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (which oddly enough has locked English subtitles), regulated to the extras disc perhaps for this reason. For years sections of the film were missing due to the negative being cut to make the “Champion Matsuri” version, Toho was forced to use laserdisc-quality footage to recreate these scenes and these are still evident here. What’s disappointing is that Toho has since rediscovered the footage and made a 4K restoration of *King Kong vs. Godzilla* but Criterion was forbidden from using it.

The extras are the best attribute. There’s a wealth of documentary and interview material, including an insightful interview with Ishiro Honda by *Hedorah* director Yoshimitsu Banno and Toho’s SFX Outtake Collection with English subtitles. This is an illuminating documentary first released to Japanese video in 1986 that really shows you the inner working of Toho’s tokusatsu unit. There’s also the commentary by David Kalat ported over from the standalone *Godzilla* ’54 release. Sadly, the Japanese commentaries on the various Blu-rays are not trans-

lated and brought over. In addition, in the 1970s, Toho had many of the 60s films edited down to a shorter runtime to play at their Champion Matsuri kiddie matinee programs, these versions would have made a nice extra.

In addition, the packaging is a mixed bag. Rather than come in thick normal-sized box like many other film series sets, this set is an enormous, unwieldy package bigger than an LP sleeve and the discs are tucked in paper pouches rather than being properly housed in plastic holders. The box art is strange and unappealing, featuring a Heisei-style Godzilla rather than Showa style. Overall, aside from having some decent extras, the best thing I can say about this set is that it’s a rather inexpensive legal way to get the entire Showa Godzilla series in HD. Most fans will be quite happy with it. But for diehard kaiju otaku like myself, this release falls far short of what it could have been if Toho’s obsession with profit and controlling their IP didn’t get in the way. There’s an anecdotal story about how Koichi Kawakita (SFX director of the Heisei/VS series), asked Toho’s brass to do a proper full scale restoration of Honda’s sci-fi classic *The Mysterians* (1957). They shot him down, saying “Why spend the extra money when people will buy it anyway.” It’s a shame that Toho cares too little about how good these films look and more about their profitability.

- J.L. Carrozza



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Ramen Shop

Food and family take on a deeper meaning in *Ramen Shop*, a 2018 Japanese/Singaporean/ French co-production directed by Eric Khoo. The story begins with the strained relationship between Masato (played by Takumi Saitoh) and his father, Kazuo (played by Tsuyoshi Ihara). Together with Uncle Akio (played by Tetsuya Bessho), the two men own and operate a popular ramen restaurant in Takasaki, but their family life is cold and bleak because Kazuo has shut himself off from the rest of the world after his beloved wife, Mei Lian (played by Jeanette Aw), passed away years ago. When Kazuo suddenly dies while opening the restaurant one morning, Masato is left adrift and alone, uncertain what to do with his future. With the help of Miki (played by Seiko Matsuda), a Japanese food historian and blogger living in Singapore, Masato temporarily closes up shop and



Shop is a quiet and understated film with low stakes but a high emotional payoff, and one of the film's strongest tools is the cinematography by Brian Gothong Tan,

making him appear as a vulnerable, solitary figure and reinforcing the idea of his emotional distance. Masato isn't "alone in a crowd"; he's simply alone, and the throngs of people that you'd expect in such densely populated cities are strangely absent. The framing shifts when food is involved: whether it's a bowl of ramen or a serving of chilli crab, the cuisine in *Ramen Shop* is filmed in exquisite extreme close-up, and this meticulous attention to culinary dishes bridges the gap between Masato's isolation and the human connections that he seeks to build. When food and family are at the forefront of a scene, close-ups and medium shots highlight the characters' rich interior lives and burgeoning relationships.

History and religion also cast a long shadow in *Ramen Shop*. Both stretch across time, distance, and cultural barriers to influence Masato and his family in unforeseen ways. For example, at the same time that Masato visits Singapore to learn how his parents met and fell in love, an installation at a local museum chronicles the Japanese invasion of Singapore in February 1942, an event that plays a major role in the rift that formed between Masato's mother Mei Lian and his maternal grandmother, Madam Lee (played by Beatrice Chien). Similarly, the influence of Buddhism can be seen in the many visual allusions to the merciful goddess Guan Yin,

which the film juxtaposes with Mei Lian, and also in the recurring imagery of the family's daruma doll. At the conclusion of the film, after Masato has mastered the family recipe for bak kuk teh, a traditional pork rib soup, and created a new fusion of Japanese and Singaporean cuisine that honors both sides of his ancestry, it is only then that the daruma doll is shown with both eyes painted in, indicating a wish that has come true.

Low-key, bittersweet, and sentimental, *Ramen Shop* is a fine choice for viewers who hunger for a simple family drama that explores a rich culinary and cultural history and that eschews the sound and the fury of so many larger productions for a more intimate approach. Like the "ramen teh" created by the film's protagonist, *Ramen Shop* is a blend of different film traditions with a style all its own. Distributed on DVD by Strand Home Video and (at the time of this writing) also available via digital outlets such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, *Ramen Shop* is comfort food for the soul, and an easy recommendation for any viewer with a discerning taste for cinema.

- Paul Thomas Chapman



AVAILABLE FROM
Strand Home Video
ORIGINALLY RELEASED
1985
RUNNING TIME
90 Minutes



travels to Singapore to reconnect with his mother's side of the family and to learn the secrets of Singaporean cuisine.

One part family drama and one part gourmet travelogue, *Ramen*

which employs subtle framing for maximum psychological effect. In the beginning of the film, both in Takasaki and Singapore, Masato is constantly depicted with wide shots and deep compositions,

The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening Remake done right



PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Grezzo

SYSTEM(S)
Switch

AVAILABLE
Now

RATING
E

Link's Awakening, and Nintendo

Remakes come in all shapes, sizes, and levels of justification for actually being considered a "remake" rather than a simple remaster. If there's any classic game that deserved a full head-to-toe remake to open it up for a new generation, though, it's definitely *The Legend of Zelda:*

visuals for the sake of being able to run on the Game Boy. It very much looked the part of its older brother, featuring a cleverly woven world, large sprites, and a story that took some surprisingly dark turns.

All of those turns are present and accounted for in the new remake, which has developer Grezzo sprucing up the classic for Nintendo's current portable/console hybrid. Grezzo previously worked on the 3DS versions of *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask*, which no doubt paved the way for Nintendo's ever-growing confidence in the team. That trust paid off here, because *Link's Awakening* is every bit the classic it's known to be, and now it has the gorgeous visuals to back it

into a mysterious owl who (hoo?) tells him the only way to leave the island: wake the sleeping Wind Fish. With that knowledge in mind, Link travels the land, helping locals, finding his way inside dungeons, and solving their devious puzzles to secure various musical instruments. Get all eight and he'll finally be able to wake the Wind Fish ... but is this a good thing? The game occasionally plants seeds of



perfect. While it's not exactly at the level of tilt-shift photography found in games like *3D Dot Game Heroes*, the toy-like aesthetic makes it feel as if you're zooming around with little Zelda action figures on a detailed and expansive playset. Best of all, they pulled this off without messing too much with the designs that set this entry apart

from the rest. They even kept in the weirdly off-model *Super Mario Bros.* enemies!

If I had any complaints about this remake, it's that it also retains a few of the annoyances of the original, like the dull fetch quest that's required to complete the game. There are also some new additions that just didn't click with me, like Dampé's shack, in which players can insert dungeon tiles to work on their own puzzling creations. *Zelda Maker* this is not, though, so don't go in expecting something terribly deep here. Performance issues hamper the frame rate, as well, but hopefully those will be fixed in the future.

For those diving into *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* for the first time, know that it's a much simpler *Zelda* game than what you might be used to. It has a ton of heart, though,

and there's something inherently satisfying about drilling one of these down to the basics, mostly single-floor Dungeon plans and all. In 2019, this remains one of the best entries in Nintendo's flagship saga.

- Joseph Luster



and developer Grezzo teamed up to deliver a reminder of why this is one of the best traditional *Zelda* games in the series' long and impressive history.

The original *Link's Awakening* hit Game Boy back in 1993, shortly after the 1991 [Japanese] release of Super Nintendo classic *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. While the Game Boy version of the former may look a little dated to those accustomed to modern entries in the series, it's a technical marvel when you take its platform into consideration. *Link's Awakening* wasn't like other portable entries in popular series that compromised

up and plead a case to today's newer players.

When I say it's the same game, I mean it. Nintendo even preserved the old localization for the most part, which plays a major role in the bizarre mood of this entry. After a beautiful anime cutscene, *Link's Awakening* finds Link washed ashore on Koholint Island, and he soon meets a lovely young girl named Marin. Before long, he runs



doubt that make its narrative much more interesting and somewhat melancholy, despite all the goofy features on the surface.

As for the presentation that makes *Link's Awakening* Switch-worthy, for my money it's simply

YU-NO: A Girl Who Chants Love at the Bound of This World

A classic visual novel on the go!



PUBLISHER
Spike Chunsoft
DEVELOPER
ELF Corporation, Spb. Inc.
SYSTEM(S)
Switch, PS4, PC
AVAILABLE
Now
RATING
M

The Switch has become something of a haven for music games and visual novels, which makes it an awesome option for players looking for the more niche side of things in the industry. One of the latest additions to the visual novel quarry is *YU-NO: A Girl Who Chants Love at the Bound of This World*. A work from 5pb, Mages, and Spike Chunsoft, it's actually a remake of a Sega Saturn visual novel that was once a Japanese exclusive.

Following a high school

one with several paths you'll want to investigate every step of the way.

While the initial setup finds Takuya otherwise going about his daily life, the rest of the game finds you exploring several points of interest in different scenes. Takuya will offer his thoughts about whatever you click on to investigate, and from there you can find important bits of information that can help you push the story along. In addition to items you can pick up and use to interact with people and things in your environment, the game utilizes a system called the Auto Diverge Mapping System, or A.D.M.S., to

ments of the story have been completed and where you are at parallel moments in the story.

It's an enigmatic, gripping 90s sci-fi tale that's far more immersive due to its multiple options and storytelling mechanics, with a likable cast and improved graphics over its original Sega Saturn iteration. It makes perfect sense to finally land on Switch with an accessible port after all these years, and it offers an experience unlike most other entries in the genre available on the system. If you're a fan of visual novels and haven't yet had the pleasure of embarking



student named Takuya Arima, whose father is killed in an accident at a research site, this text-heavy visual novel (as they all are) is about the aftermath of Takuya receiving a package from his supposedly deceased father. Despite the fact that Takuya didn't have a great relationship with his father, the package still haunts him. It turns out Dad is not only still alive, but he's in a place that he'll never be found.

Inside the same package is a method that will allow Takuya to travel through time. When he heads to the location named in the letter with the device, he finds a young woman who's dying. Accompanying her are an old friend of his father's as well as another student. From there, an intriguing, time-traveling adventure begins,

help you make sense of the paths you're taking.

It creates a map of the parallel worlds woven together in-game to give you a visual representation of where you've been and where you're going next as you work to unravel the mystery behind Takuya's father and his location—as well as a slew of other intriguing stories. This way, you can navigate through several points to see what ele-



on this unique adventure just yet, you should certainly see where this time-traveling journey takes you. The fact that it's playable on the go is just the icing on the cake.

- Brittany Vincent

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz HD

It's Monkey Ball, baby!



PUBLISHER
Sega
DEVELOPER
Sega
SYSTEM(S)
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
AVAILABLE
Now
RATING
E

While we're on the topic of remakes and remasters this issue, here we have a game that falls firmly into the latter category. Thankfully, *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz*—a game that is somehow now 13 years old!—doesn't require much work to make it look nice on modern consoles and PC. All you need is that dependable *Monkey Ball* flavor and you're ready to roll with an entry in the series that might actually be much better

without the shackles of its gimmicky Wii trappings.

The seventh entry in the *Super Monkey Ball* series originally launched alongside



Nintendo Wii in 2006, and thus it was required to show off all those fancy motion controls that made Nintendo's insanely popular console both

alluring and occasionally infuriating. The controls didn't amount to much unless you really liked tilting your Wiimote and flicking it up to make your monkey jump, so it's nice to have a version that's playable with each console's respective normal controller now.

Another change-up from the original release

Epic Seven

Phlasy phone phantasy



PUBLISHER
Smilegate Megaport
DEVELOPER
Smilegate Megaport
SYSTEM(S)
iOS, Android
AVAILABLE
Now
RATING
N/A

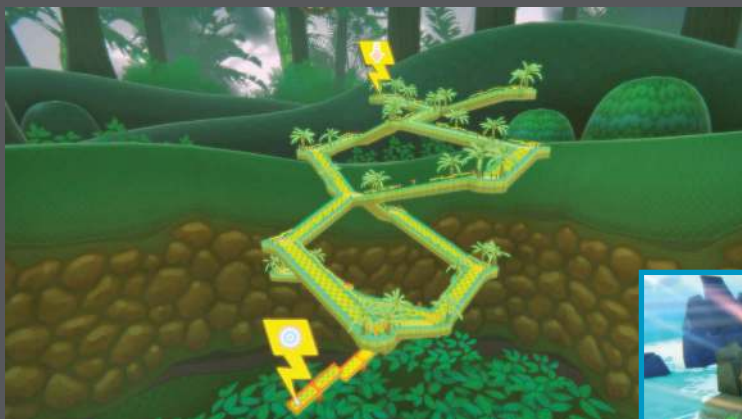
At this point, anime-style games are pretty much a dime a dozen on mobile devices. You'll find most of them to be some form of role-playing game with a gacha mechanic that has you plunking in as much time (and potentially money) as possible to get your Best Boy or Best Girl locked down as part of your team. While some of the usual components are certainly present in

Epic Seven, there's an interesting side-scrolling RPG lying just beneath its high-gloss skin.

Like many of its contemporaries, *Epic Seven* starts off with a bang. Players are thrown right into the action and quickly learn the ropes through instant turn-based battles. It plays out on a two-dimensional plane, more like the recent indie game *Indivisible* than your average classic *Final Fantasy* entry, and it's easy and intuitive to pull off attacks and special moves.

The story kicks in shortly after, inviting players into the 7th World in an effort to put an end to a ceaseless cycle of destruction. Thanks to





concerns the amount of mini-games. While the Wii version boasted a whopping 50 mini-games, most of them were designed around holding the



Wiimote in different ways to do things like throwing darts. With *Banana Blitz HD*, that line-up of games has been whittled down to 10, so consider this more of a "best of" when it comes to this particular mode. According to a NintendoEverything interview with producer and

director Masao Shirosaki, they decided to beef this up with the addition of Decathlon Mode, giving players the challenge of beating all 10 mini-games in a row and avoiding the issue



of the games only being played in multiplayer.

For hardened vets of the series, the main draw here is going to be modes like Time Attack, which challenge you to beat your best times and exploit all those speedy tricks you've spent the last decade and some change mas-

tering. For everyone else, the core game is plenty, and it doesn't take long for the challenge to ramp up to ridiculous (but still enjoyable) levels. *Super Monkey Ball* has always been a series that mixed frustration and fun in a seemingly effortless way. *Banana Blitz* is no different, and the only real warning I'd give you is to avoid playing it on a huge projector while sitting too close to the screen. I don't normally get motion

sickness, but man this game is wobbly!

With that hyper-specific caveat aside, I have no problem wholeheartedly recommending *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz HD* to everyone who enjoys interesting and unabashedly silly

dexterity challenges. The enthusiasm the team has for the game comes through in everything from the music to its boisterous UI, and it's just nice to have *Monkey Ball* back on our screens where it belongs.

- Joseph Luster

the nature of the genre, this immediately entails the introduction of plenty of attractively designed characters, which is perfect for anyone who finds themselves hooked on gacha mechanics. Judging from the community that's deep in this one, the drop rates aren't exactly the highest at the time of this writing, but that can always change in future updates.

For those who care about more than gacha mechanics, it's difficult to understate how much of an impact the overall aesthetic has on the experience. *Epic Seven* bills itself as "the playable animation," and as far as phone and tablet games are concerned that's not a bad way to sell it. Even on a relatively small phone screen, the graphics are clear and colorful, and the animations that go along with battle are fluid, with satisfying visual effects.

There are plenty of ways to earn rewards throughout your time with *Epic Seven*, from the Raid Labyrinth to the PvP Arena and the three-on-three

battles of Guild Wars. I was personally more interested in making my way through the solo campaign, but it's nice to have the option of testing your mettle against other players and



attempting to flex as the strongest Guild in the game. It all ultimately plays back into further incentive to roll the dice with the gacha system, but it's not the only way to

engage with what Smilegate Megaport has cooked up here.

If you've already written off mobile device games like this, there isn't a ton in *Epic Seven*

that will pull you back into the fold. With that said, it's always worth giving games like this a shot. It's a free download, and unless you actually feel like investing your own money to enhance your Guild you can get by with casual play for as long as you'd like. For my money, I just like the way *Epic Seven* plays more than most of the other anime-style RPGs I've played on my phone, so it will probably continue to be something I chip away at whenever I'm trying to kill some time.

- Joseph Luster

Conception Plus

Standard dungeon-crawling with a twist



PUBLISHER
Spike Chunsoft
DEVELOPER
Spike Chunsoft
SYSTEM(S)
PS4, PC
AVAILABLE
Now
RATING
M

Conception Plus: Maidens of the Twelve Stars isn't the first time Western audiences will have had their brush with the *Conception* series. This new release is actually the first game prior to 2013's localization of *Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars*. You may have missed it, or found your understanding a bit lacking given that English-speaking audiences got to the games out of order, but this new release should help in both respects.

Conception Plus is essentially about what its title implies: it does revolve around pregnancy, but not in the way you'd assume. It follows protagonist Itsuki Yuge and his friend Mahiru, who are sucked into a strange portal. There, they discover they've been selected to save the world of Granvania from nasty monsters known as Impurities—or else they'll never be able to return home. That puts them in something of a



predicament. To do this, they'll need beings known as "Star Children."

Star Children are created between Yuge and the 12 Star Maidens of the zodiac. Using a ritual known as "Classmating," energy is drawn from Itsuki and combined with a maiden to mingle in a special device. Star Children are born with

various sets, with combinations that produce warriors, mages, and other different configurations like you'd expect from a typical RPG or dungeon crawler. Itsuki must improve relations and intimacy with each of the Star Maidens if he wants to create even more powerful Star Children as the game progresses.

BurgerTime Party! Order up!

BurgerTime is a classic arcade game that's been around for nearly 40 years. Players have been stacking burgers for four decades, and as such, it's about time for another update to both the game's aesthetic and mechanics. Enter *BurgerTime Party!*, XSEED and G-Mode's latest refresh of the venerable arcade franchise.

The last true update to the franchise was nearly 10 years ago with *BurgerTime World Tour*, and while this new version is nowhere near perfect, it's still a fun time for fans of the original game and newcomers who haven't yet experienced the thrill of building their own delicious food towers.

Chef Peter Pepper and company (burger patties, lettuce, hot dogs, eggs, and other food creatures) have returned for another round of single, co-op, and multiplayer fun. You'll notice first off that the game's



PUBLISHER
XSEED Games
DEVELOPER
G-Mode
SYSTEM(S)
Switch
AVAILABLE
Now
RATING
T





Star Children are deployed alongside Itsuki when it comes to battling your way through dungeons as you fight off Impurities. You can take 12 Star Children into a dungeon at a time, snapping up goodies, taking part in turn-based fights. This part of the game is pretty pedestrian, and you'll have seen systems just like it in just about every other dungeon crawler in the genre, but getting there by creating the Star Children is the most intriguing part of it all.

The other half of the game can be likened to *Persona* in a way, where Itsuki must speak with Star Maidens and get closer to them, which improves their relationship overall. There's a lot of fun to be had in figuring out which maidens

make the best combinations with Itsuki for Star Children, and if experimenting with stats and bonuses like that makes you happy, you'll find plenty to love here. Plus, the game's absolutely



gorgeous and colorful, which makes seeing all the wonderful and weird Star Children you can birth into the world a metagame of sorts in itself. They all have their own wacky designs, and like merging demons in the *Shin Megami Tensei* franchise, there are always some interesting ones out there.

Conception Plus: Maidens of the Twelve Stars doesn't rewrite the manual on dungeon-crawling battles and exploration, but it does implement some truly interesting riffs on narrative that you'll definitely want to delve into further. And don't worry—even if you don't like kids, you'll find a reason to keep coming back.

- Brittany Vincent

look adopts a fun, classic 2D animation-styled modern aesthetic that's still colorful and great looking, with plenty of stylistic points that make it feel more like a *Persona* title than an update of an arcade classic.

You can opt to play a series of single-player missions that play out in quick, bite-sized sessions. For *BurgerTime* newbies, the game is quite simple. You have burger buns (or hot dog buns) lining the bottom of the screen. You need to run across each ingredient across several floors to ensure they drop down (hamburger, lettuce, eggs, cheese, etc.) and complete the burger there.

You have to complete several burgers to finish each level. While you're trying to do this, anthropomorphic eggs, hot dogs, pickles, and other enemies will try and stop you. If you get hit once, you'll lose a life. You get a limited number of pepper shots you can use to dispel them, but most of the time, you just need to be clever enough to avoid them as they travel up and down ladders to get to you. You can do all this solo in the beginning of the game via Solo Burger mode, then try out Main Burger mode, which lets you play in larger stages in which up to four players can join in.

There are over 100 stages that ramp up in difficulty the further you go into the game, and they're all reasonably well-designed, even though *BurgerTime* itself can be a one-trick pony in the first place. One of the most exciting



elements of the game, clearly engineered to be played with others, is the Battle Burger mode, which lets one player take on the role of Peter Pepper, while others are the egg, pickles, and hot dog characters who try to thwart his every move. Finally, Challenge Burger has online leaderboards and more challenging stages that you can play through alone if you're looking for something more difficult.

Beyond those modes, there isn't much to do in this arcade revival. But when you get right down to it, that's true of most of its iterations.

Overall, *BurgerTime Party!* is a simple, no-frills update to a classic arcade game that everyone can pick up and play. Given that it landed on Switch, it's a good opportunity for those who like fun and frantic multiplayer action to jump in and enjoy themselves, even if it doesn't rewrite the book on *BurgerTime* or anything like that. As long as you have several different ways to play the game everyone's familiar with, it should season your patty just fine. Just don't expect a particularly gourmet experience.

- Brittany Vincent

Packing It In! Decisions, decisions

HELLO, FELLOW OTAKU! The convention season is still quite some time away, but it's never too early to start preparing to show off the cosplay that you've been working so hard on, whether creating it from scratch or gathering all the pieces together to get things just right. Whether it's a local convention or one states away, there are some things to keep in mind well before the fun begins.

Speaking of packing, choosing which cosplay to pack for a convention is a decision that should be mindful of factors at the convention. Think about the weather of the area. It might not be the best idea to wear a full leather cosplay in over a hundred-degree summer weather, or a skin-bearing cosplay in snowy conditions. Or if you must, bringing a small fan for the heat or a coat for the cold can make staying in cosplay all day, much easier.

Ease should be something you strive for. You don't want to exhaust yourself after a few hours if you really want to wear a cosplay all day. Adding padded insoles to heels or hard boots can help with tired feet. Consider taking breaks throughout the day to loosen the corset or take off the armor a bit to breathe. Find a way to add pockets or a bag into your cosplay to hold things.

If you decide to wear something big and challenging, check to see if you have friends available at the convention that can help you, whether it's getting put together in the morning or just getting around the con floor.

Before you leave, do your research and check cosplay and prop guidelines for all conventions before attending. Many conventions limit the materials that props can be made of for safety and incorporate cosplay guidelines to make the environment friendly for all attendees. Safest bets for props are to stay away from harder materials like woods or metals and always make sure to stop by prop check when you get to the convention.

Traveling to a convention with a cosplay can be challenging in and of itself especially when not traveling by car. Air travel requires consideration of numerous factors when choosing which cosplays to pack and how. Any larger props have to be able to break down to fit luggage, 50-pound weight limits of checked bags have to be minded and then there is the dreaded TSA luggage check. One way to help ensure your cosplays get to their destination in one piece is to add a note inside your suitcase letting TSA know that any weapons inside are props and that you are a costume maker. While this won't guarantee TSA doesn't search your cosplay but it may help them to be gentler with your items and to not think any weapons are dangerous, thus confiscating them.

Lastly, think about packing emergency items like a cosplay repair kit in case something breaks, an extra "easy" cosplay in case you get tired or one breaks and a little extra emergency money in case something ... happens. The most important thing is to be prepared and to have fun.

Ani-Mia links

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Animia.cosplay

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Instagram: www.instagram.com/animiaoofficial



First Glance Photography



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First Glance Photography

Mangacaster

An interview with Ed Chavez, co-founder of DENPA.

Ed Chavez knows manga like no one else. Starting out as a podcaster and blogger (@mangacast on Twitter), his expertise quickly attracted attention in both America and Japan. For years, he edited manga for CMX, Seven Seas, Kodansha Japan, Vertical, and FAKKU. He even inspired the lead character of Yuji Moritaka and Keiji Adachi's baseball manga *GuraZeni* ("Money Pitch").

Then in 2017 Chavez and Jacob Grady co-founded DENPA ("frequency" or "connection"), a new manga publisher whose first books came out in 2018. In a North American manga market dominated by the American branches of large Japanese publishing houses, DENPA stands out as a small publisher whose acquisitions come from personal taste: from the surreal art-manga *Invitation from a Crab*, to the kink of *Pleasure and Corruption*, to the cooking manga *Today's Menu for the Emiya Family* and more.

Otaku USA: How would you describe DENPA?

Ed Chavez: We're a small publishing house looking to share the breadth of what manga is in Japan and should be in the West. I wouldn't call us "indie" because while we aren't owned by a Japanese company, nor do we only release unknown titles or artists. *Fate/* is a known property, for example. *Gundam* [coming in 2020—

Ed.] is one of the backbones of anime and manga. *Kaiji* is a bestseller in Japan.

You've acquired several titles from lesser known manga magazines, like *Maiden Railways* from the shojo/josei magazine *Rakuen*. Are there still a lot of cool smaller manga magazines out there in the shadow of the big ones?

There are. Magazines like Hakuensha's *Rakuen* or Kadokawa's *Harta* are not so well known but the content they put out is visually unique and, more importantly, has narratives that are thoughtful and innovative. So for me, these magazines are a priority when I look to acquire new titles, mainly because I want to do my part to keep them around.

Traditionally, the backbone of the manga industry has been print, but lately, there's been several high-profile manga webcomics ...

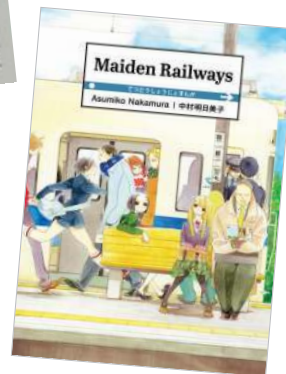
We've actually licensed a few webcomics already: *Today's Menu for the Emiya Family*, *Invitation from a Crab*, and *The Girl with the Fierce Eyes* [coming in May 2020—Ed.]. Manga has changed a lot over the years and, yes, digital distribution has been one of the biggest factors. Since the Great Tohoku Earthquake Japan has really changed its distribution priorities for manga. After the quake and tsunami, shipping lines were damaged. Printing presses and paper suppliers also experienced hardships. So a few publishers quickly

moved to push their manga, especially their magazines, to online and mobile services.

Now with services like Pixiv more publishers are moving their series to the web. Mangaka are even making their debuts there as well on places like Twitter. So while magazines are still in print, more and more manga starts online, whether on a platform run by a publisher or an art-themed website like Pixiv.

One of the coolest titles you're publishing is *An Invitation from a Crab* by panpanya.

Crab is extremely indie, but to us at DENPA, panpanya is something of a superstar. panpanya is a dojin event regular. They also draw art for the Japanese pop culture store Mandarake.



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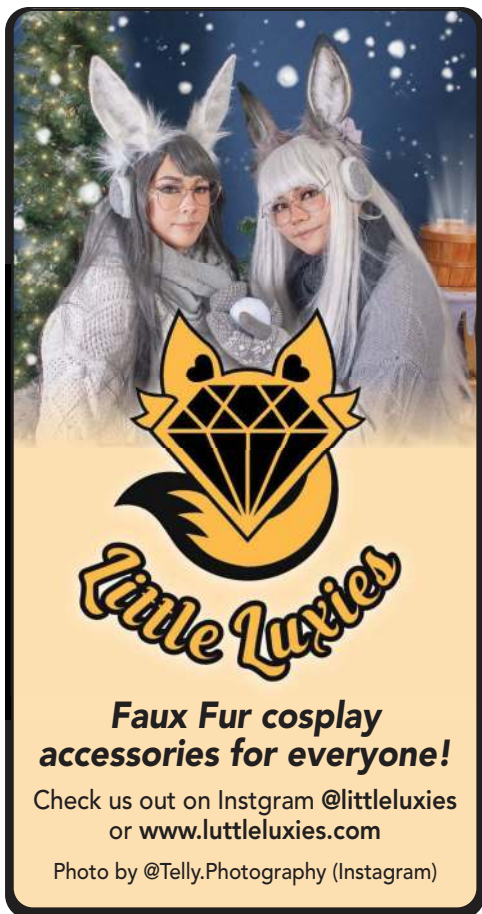
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Their readers are people who go to TacoChe [an indie bookstore in Tokyo—Ed.] and that don't read manga as disposable media. panpanya readers want to experience manga through a new fresh lens.

You're also publishing *Gambling Apocalypse Kaiji* from 1996 (!!!).

Kaiji is another very DENPA title. When I suggested it to my co-founders, they were immediately on board as longtime fans of the franchise. But what really made this series an ideal fit for us was the gambling element. DENPA on its own is a big risk. We are constantly battling self-doubt, finances, and market pressures. And *Kaiji* is all about that!

Tell us about a new DENPA title.

If I were to pitch a new release it would be *Heavenly Delusion* by Masakazu Ishiguro. It's a postapocalyptic tale that visually is super-stylish and has touches that remind me of *Akira*.

Heavenly Delusion takes place in two worlds. One world is a hellscape where the population has been decimated ... possibly by monsters, but maybe by something even more sinister. Among the few people that remain are two young-

sters who are looking for a place called "Heaven."

The other setting is a school where robots are teachers and caretakers. The kids are carefree and healthy within their walled garden and know nothing about whatever apocalypse may have happened in Tokyo. It looks like heaven, but there's something strange about it.

These two settings may seem worlds apart, but something is drawing the two together. Kids in both places are awakening to the knowledge that there might be something out there. What that might be and where is the mystery ...

If fans want to support your work, beyond buying it, what can they do?

Review our books. Sharing and tagging us in social media goes a long way also, but unsolicited reviews help create awareness, as we can post them on places like Amazon and B&N. Written reviews help a lot more than podcasts or videos because quotes can be easily confirmed and we might even put them on future releases/reprints!

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